

School-to-Home Connections in Foster Families

By

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Abstract

This dissertation contributes to the school and family relations discussion by describing school-to-home interactions in foster care families. This study extends current literature to examine, define and characterize the relationship between elementary school teachers and foster families, who serve as volunteer, stand-in parents for some of the most vulnerable, at-risk and disadvantaged youth in the American education system. Using qualitative research methods with in-depth interviews from a purposeful sample, the study examines the perceptions and characteristics of participants in school and foster family relationships. Specifically, the study explores the following: How do elementary teachers describe their experiences working with foster families? How do foster parents describe their experiences working with elementary teachers? What are some of the strategies that appear to improve the interactions of teachers and foster families? What are some of the remaining challenges? Foster families, teachers, school leaders and other stakeholders communicate to make decisions together based on multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) and positive behavior instructional models (PBIS). Due to a high number of foster students in special education, individual education plans (IEPs) are an added area of collaboration for schools and foster families. Together, teachers and foster parents analyze a full scope of data and solve problems to close the achievement gap of students in foster care.

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Chapter One - Statement of the Problem and Project Goals

Overview

Since the creation of American schools, families have been given choice and voice in the education of their children. Waves of studies show the benefits of involving families in a student's education: "The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on children's achievement in school and through life" (Mapp & Henderson 2002:7). Family involvement at elementary levels includes practices such as: preparing children for school; communicating clearly back and forth; attending school events; fulfilling teacher requests with discipline needs and support; and ensuring completion of homework (Epstein 1986, Hoover-Dempsey 1987). While these positive links to student growth exist naturally for most birth families, foster families are not always equipped to experience these advantages due to a lack of history with the child and the nature of the foster care setting. Therefore, building and maintaining a strong school-to-home connection with teachers and school leaders requires additional initiation, effort and support.

Foster parents serve nearly 500,000 children in the child welfare system. Teachers and families face difficulties in foster care settings to engage in school-to-home connections due to high rates of school mobility; lack of student background information; inconsistent adult oversight of student education; student behavior and emotional distress; and lack of openness by teachers or parents (Walker & Smithgall 2009). The foster care student population is one of the nation's most academically vulnerable groups, marked with low test scores, high dropout rates and low rates of college entry and completion (Siri 2008). In one Midwestern state, high school graduation rates of youth in foster care hover around 20%, lower than the statewide rate of 80% (SRS 2011). Within five years of leaving the child welfare system, 51% of young adults in foster care are unemployed, 40% are on public assistance, 25% become homeless and 20% are

incarcerated (Siri 2008). Improving educational outcomes may help free former foster children from these cycles of low achievement, and many studies show that family involvement is one of the highest sources contributing to student success in school (Henderson & Mapp 2007; Turnbull 2007; Epstein 2001). Therefore, this study examines school-to-home connections with foster families and seeks to identify potential strategies for improving these outcomes.

As a trademark characteristic of high-performing schools, family interactions allow students to accelerate improvement and growth. Yet foster parents often lack access and connections due to their unique situations of providing care for non-birth children. Teachers and leaders also can lack strategies to engage foster parents with schools. Within this dissertation, I focus on the central research questions: How do elementary teachers describe their experiences working with foster families? How do foster families describe their experiences working with elementary teachers? What are some of the strategies that appear to improve the interactions of teachers and foster families? What are some of the remaining challenges?

Concepts of Foster Care

Throughout this study, I use many terms relating to foster care settings and educational arenas. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) is the principal agency regulating and funding the federal child welfare program, with goals to achieve the following: families and individuals empowered for independence and healthy communities to improve the development of children (HHS 2010). The Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS), a division of the HHS, compiles an array of statistics and data regarding the child welfare system. Reflecting the piecemeal nature of the child welfare system, HHS works closely with the Department of Justice, in addition to more than 35 other federal agencies (Murray 2010). Thus, foster care is a key component of the national child welfare system managed by HHS on a state level where judges designate minors as wards of the government.

Foster children, from birth to age 18 or 21, are assigned to private homes of state certified caregivers, also referred to as foster parents (Pew 2008). Foster families are responsible for the day-to-day care of the child, and they are often reimbursed to some degree for their related expenses. Intended to be a short-term situation, the average stay in foster care is 28.8 months in an average of three different placement settings or homes (Pew 2008). The Congressional Budget Office estimates federal expenditures to be more than \$4.6 billion annually for foster care (HHS 2010). Given the patchwork of funding sources at a state level for foster care, it is difficult to accurately determine how much states spend for child welfare services, including educational expenses (Murray 2010).

While each state varies in specific details and processes, social workers and case managers in child protection agencies oversee the formal case plans, which are formal documents detailing the goals for short-term care and long-term permanency. Based on quarterly meetings, a team of social workers, foster parents, therapists, medical doctors, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) volunteers and lawyers representing a foster child's legal interests called guardian ad litem (GAL) makes decisions and sets goals on case plans. These plans are submitted for approval before judges who monitor the cases. Educational advocates are trained representatives assigned by the state to oversee the IEP and may also be part of the case plan team.

In most situations, foster care is designed to lead to a permanent placement, such as reunification with birth parents as the first choice or adoption by a biological family member, foster parent or other qualified adult. Another case plan option is guardianship, where foster families or others take on some legal rights, but not the full status of parents. One of the last options involves establishing other planned permanent living arrangements, like an independent living center. Nationally, 53% of foster children return to their biological parents; 17% are

adopted; 16% live with relatives or guardianships; 9% age out of the system at the age of 18 or older; 4% for other reasons such as run a ways, transfers or death; and 1% for unknown reasons (AFCARS 2010).

Teachers and school leaders are under the federal oversight of the U.S. Department of Education (ED). ED assists state, district, and school-level leaders by implementing laws based on four principles: accountability for results; local control and flexibility; expanded parental choice; and effective programs (ED 2004). Each local school district maintains governance for policies, and schools often create individualized multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS); positive behavior instructional models (PBIS); and individual education plans (IEP) to serve their students. Responding to continually updated federal legislation, several laws specifically outline requirements for the education of students in foster care. These laws include all stakeholders to promote educational stability and reduce school mobility. Also under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), families are bound by federal law to step up as “informed and empowered decision makers” (Gomez & Greenough 2002:1). To fully comply with federal guidelines, school leaders must develop and implement school-family involvement programs.

Several researchers provide frameworks for understanding school-to-home interactions. Epstein created a six-part framework of involvement detailing the effects of 1) parenting, 2) communicating, 3) volunteering, 4) learning at home, 5) decision making, and 6) collaborating with the community to develop partnership programs to promote student success (2001). Ho Sui-Chu and Willms identified several basic types of family involvement by focusing on actions both at home and school including: 1) discussing school activities; 2) monitoring out-of-school activities; 3) contacts with school staff; and 4) volunteering and attending school events (1996). Another form of family and school partnership includes areas of focus on: 1) *parent effort*: contacts with school, expectations of students, and discussions with students; 2) *instructional*

support: structuring time for students to engage in learning outside school; and 3)

environmental support: quality of school, knowing a student's friends and out-of-school activities (Williams 1998). My dissertation clarifies the distinctive ways foster families engage in these school-to-home interactions.

In review, this dissertation identifies the unique challenges of serving foster care populations in the school arena, as well as detailing the unique cases of interactions among foster families, teachers and school leaders. This extension of research examines the distinctive aspects of school connections within foster care, with a lens of exploring teacher-family relationships. Debunking the idea that the existing research speaks for all families, this study highlights the distinctive characteristics of educating foster children and details how elementary teachers and foster families perceive and characterize their relationships.

Researcher Background

Since 2008, my wife and I acquired practical, round-the-clock insight from the complexities of the child welfare system by serving as foster parents for six youth, as well as short-term respite care for many more placements. Learning from my own personal ability to navigate the system, I have a working understanding of the protocol for educating foster care students with a variety of student needs and teacher approaches. My wife and I experienced four schools in two districts and multiple teachers who each operated with strengths and weaknesses. For example, one team of sixth grade teachers came to our home for a student celebration sendoff when our foster son's aunt adopted him. On the other hand, we worked with another teacher who would not reply to repeated emails. Academically, five of our six foster children struggled greatly in school with two on extensive IEPs. Furthermore, all of the foster children in our home exhibited significant behavior challenges, requiring near weekly interventions at school and home. We found a constant need to maintain strong school-to-

home connections to stay informed and ultimately support student success.

I became interested in the experience of other foster families as they worked with teachers and schools, as well as the perspectives of teachers who reached out to foster families. Since my wife and I are also both teachers, we had a foot in each world from the home to the classroom. As a teacher interested in underdog populations, I have found countless opportunities to initiate school-to-home connections with vulnerable students. When working with foster families as a teacher, I have had both challenging and positive relationships. In some cases, foster families were among the strongest parents to work with in helping their student grow. I have also experienced foster parents who were disinterested and lacked involvement with schools for many reasons including working professionally outside of the home, too many demands upon their time or lack of understanding on how to get involved.

With my personal foster parent and teacher background, I have witnessed a range of experiences with foster children in schools. I sought to be impartial throughout the study, not advocating for either party in this discussion. For example, I used the interview tool as a guide to avoid leading or suggestive comments. I elicited nuanced examples and detailed antidotes from the perspectives of those I interviewed to provide rich description. I captured each interviewee's stories in a complete transcription and allowed participants to review the data for any clarifications or additions. When analyzing the data, I identified major findings from each interview before attempting to draw themes from the collection. Therefore, the topics of the study were deduced from the interview content, rather than being projected from my own background. I was open to any findings the study revealed without being partial to either teachers or foster families. I remained neutral and focused on my primary purpose of hearing the perspective of others. While I have personal and professional experiences with foster care, I was interested in the diversity of experiences from my participants.

Dissertation Outline

Following the overview to the research problem in chapter one, chapter two offers a comprehensive review of relevant literature related to school-to-home connections and foster student educational outcomes. The chapter includes a broad overview of the concepts associated with teacher and parent interactions, with a focus on foster parents and children in the child welfare system. Furthermore, the chapter covers topics related to specific issues relating to the context of foster care settings to display the difficulty and challenge of educating foster youth and building teacher and foster parent relationships. Chapter three offers an overview of the research methodology used for the study, including details about the participants in the study, the interview tool, data analysis and trustworthiness of the study. Chapter four presents the results and findings regarding schools from the foster parent standpoint, while chapter five offers the perspective and experiences of elementary teachers working with foster families. Through excerpts of transcribed data, I offer common views expressed on major issues and themes. Specifically, I discuss the importance of key factors in the teacher-family relationship and how each side shares their expectations and descriptions of their interactions. Teachers and parents also identify clear strategies and additional challenges to overcome. Chapter six analyses the findings and presents implications and practices for foster families, teachers and school leaders, as well as identifying areas of further research.

Chapter Two - Literature Review

Overview of School-to-Home Connections

The ED defines parent involvement as the participation of family in “regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities” (ED 2004:5). Positive school-to-home connections include a student-centered philosophy focused on the following: enhancing success for students; closing the achievement gap; improving experiences and outcomes for children; and increasing academic, social, emotional and behavioral wellbeing (Christenson & Sheridan 2001). More than three decades of research documents positive student outcomes associated with family participation in a child’s education including: reading and math achievement, positive attitudes toward school, attendance and school retention, homework completion and positive behavior (Turnbull 2007). “When schools [and] families work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer and like school more” (Henderson & Mapp 2002:7). Partnerships also help build and sustain support for schools, since schools with family partnerships exhibit higher levels of trust, better morale, positive school climate, fewer discipline problems and higher student achievement (Turnbull 2007).

Some research even concludes the best predictor of school success is parental encouragement of learning and involvement in school life (Gelberg 1997). Studies demonstrate that when a context is created for families and schools to connect, students improve grades, test scores, attitudes, self-concepts and social skills. Learners are more engaged in classroom learning activities, achieve higher attendance rates, exhibit greater study habits, and attain higher homework completion rates (Sheridan 2004). The need for disciplinary action is also reduced (Sheridan 2004). Increased collaboration between families and schools not only

benefits students, it also empowers educators. Teachers become more proficient in professional activities; allocate more time to instruction; engage more deeply with curriculum; develop more student-oriented rather than task-oriented activities; receive higher ratings on teaching performance evaluations by principals; indicate greater satisfaction with their jobs; request fewer transfers; and implement more successful school programs (Sheridan 2004).

The school-to-home relationship involves close cooperation between parties who have clearly specified, and at times shared, rights and responsibilities for helping students achieve success (Christenson & Sheridan 2001). Partnerships not only enrich the schooling experience, but they also can inform and equip families to serve their children at home. Likewise, parents have the capacity to support their children's learning when connections exist. Families demonstrate greater understanding of schools; increase contacts and communication with educators; desire more involvement; improve communication with their children; develop effective parenting skills; and become more involved in learning activities at home (Sheridan 2004). Since school age children spend 70% of their waking hours – including weekends, summers and holidays – outside of school, families become responsible for the opportunity, structure, pace and enrichment of learning-at-home activities (Clark 1990). To embrace a philosophy of partnership of shared power and responsibility, Henderson and Mapp argue connected schools build collaborative relationships while recognizing, respecting and addressing families' needs, as well as class and cultural differences (2007).

Measured through the qualities of respect, competence and personal regard, mutual trust is one of the most vital aspects for school success and collaboration between schools and families (Bryk & Schneider 2002). The kind, rather than frequency, of interactions between families and teachers were better predictors of trust (Sheridan 2004). Expanding on trust, Epstein defines six different types of parent involvement to assist educators in developing

school and family partnership programs: 1) Parenting that establishes home environments supportive of children as students; 2) Two-way communication regarding school programs and children's progress; 3) Volunteering that gives parents access to schools as they serve in support roles 4) Learning at home enabled by information regarding how to help students with homework, other curriculum-related activities, decisions and planning; 5) Decision making that includes families as leaders and representatives; and 6) Collaborating with community to identify and integrate resources and services to strengthen school programs, family practices and student learning (Epstein 2009).

Research consistently links meaningful family involvement to student success superseding socioeconomic class, ethnic or racial background and parents' education level (Mapp & Henderson 2002). Furthermore, existing research shows the need for improving parental involvement and school-to-home connections, especially with vulnerable students, in order to improve student achievement (Henderson & Mapp 2007). Thus, the numerable benefits of school-to-home partnerships widely established by research in the general education arena and may have applications for the educational outcomes of specific populations, such as children in the foster care system.

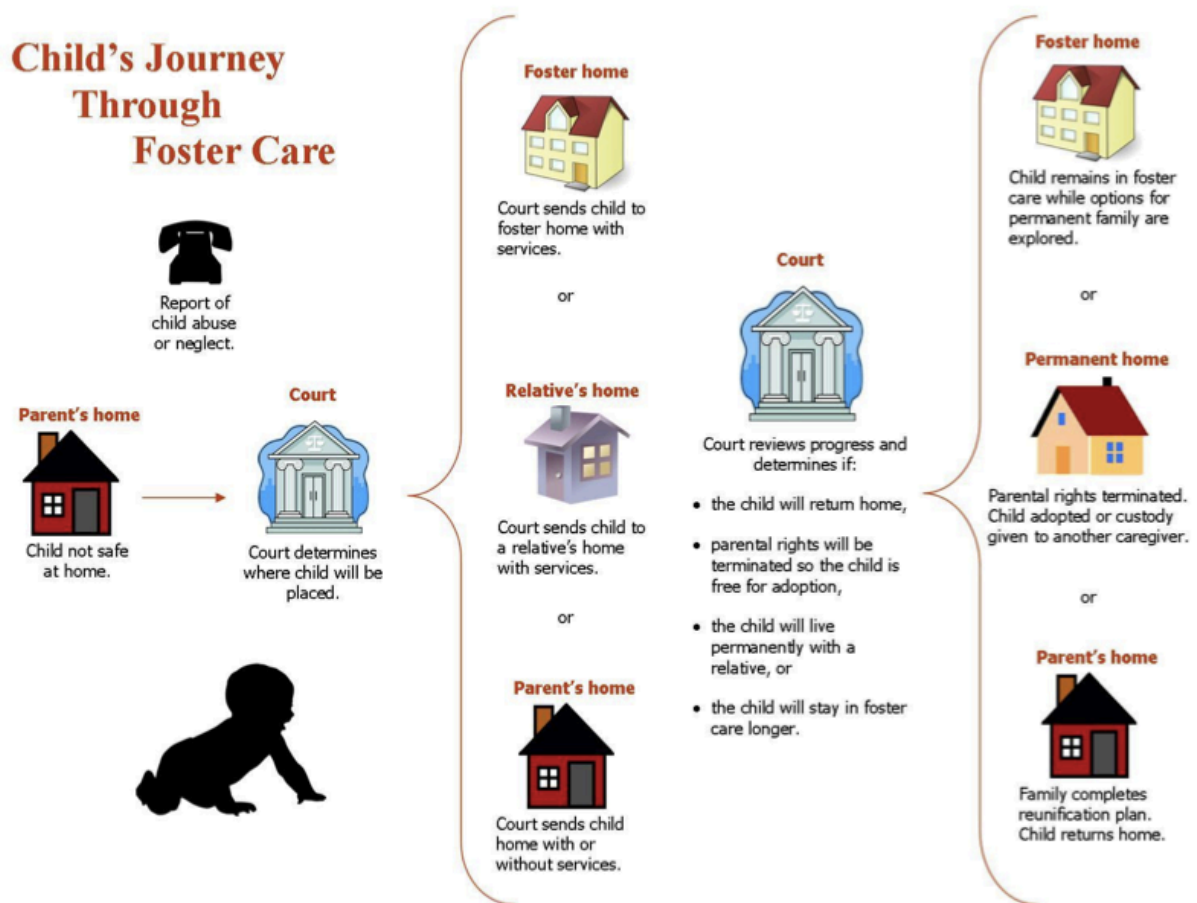
Introduction of Foster Families

Foster care is the full-time in-home care for children removed from their birth parents or guardians of origin. The foster care system is the preferred method for serving children who could not remain with their own families in the U.S. (Rowe 1984). Foster care services are provided only when a court finds a child to be in need of care, and the parents are not able to meet the safety and care needs (SRS 2011). Universally, most children requiring foster care have been abused or neglected resulting in distinctive developmental, physical and emotional needs. Among school-aged student populations, foster children comprise a subgroup struggling with health, stability, economic and wellbeing issues that translate into lower academic achievement

(Courtney 2010).

Volunteer foster parents serve a half-million children in the foster care system nationally. Licensed family foster homes are most frequently used as placement resources, but some children require more structured settings, such as group homes or residential centers. In partnership with court-ordered case plans, social workers are assigned to monitor the safety and status of children through as they move towards permanent family placements with birth or adoptive parents.

Families opening their homes to foster care reported their top motivations for serving the child welfare system as desiring to help under-privileged children, wanting a child and



This graphic is modified from *Educating Youth in State Care*, Initiative on Utah Children in Foster Care, May 2009, pg 5.

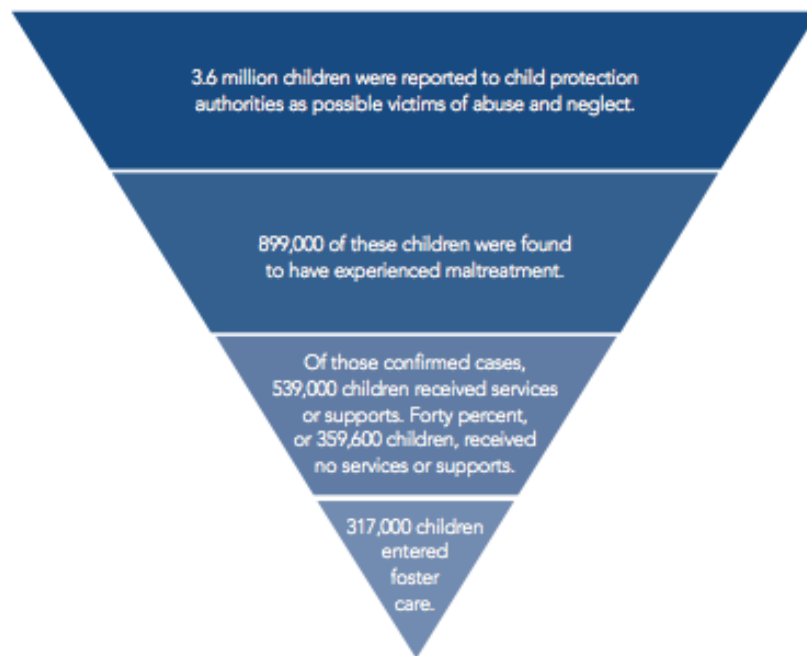
knowing a child who needed a home (Rowe 1984). Researchers list foster parental duties: addressing the child's needs, wishes and problems; making plans and decisions on the child's behalf; encouraging potential; ensuring medical care; as well as providing educational, vocational and recreational needs (Rowe 1984). Many parents perform well at these tasks, with two-thirds of the children agreeing that they were "lucky" to have been placed with a foster family, and well over half of former foster children reporting feeling satisfied with their experience (Courtney 2010).

In order to gain and sustain certification to provide foster care, families complete requirements to gain state licenses; adjust their homes to meet state housing regulations; participate in monthly visits with a social worker; undergo annual home inspections; and complete compliance reviews by a state representative. In most states, families attend a 10-week class entitled *Model Approach to Partnerships in Parenting*. The program guides families through many unique characteristics of serving as parents in the child welfare system. Additionally, families in foster care are assigned their own social worker to help meet their needs and ensure the home remains in compliance. Social workers assigned to the family and to the child are responsible for state oversight and collaborate with a team including foster and birth parents, teachers, CASA workers, therapists and legal representatives.

Introduction of Foster Children

Child protective agencies remove children from their homes for the following reasons: 65% because of abuse or neglect; 20% due to absence of their parents as resulting from death, disability or imprisonment; 10% because of delinquent behaviors; and 5% due to youth committing a juvenile status offense such as running away or truancy (Badeau & Gesiriech 2010). Foster children are placed in family foster care homes, group home care and institutional care with an average length of stay in foster care of 22.4 months (HHS 2006). Many forces are credited to undermining the resilience and coping capacity of families, leading to situations that

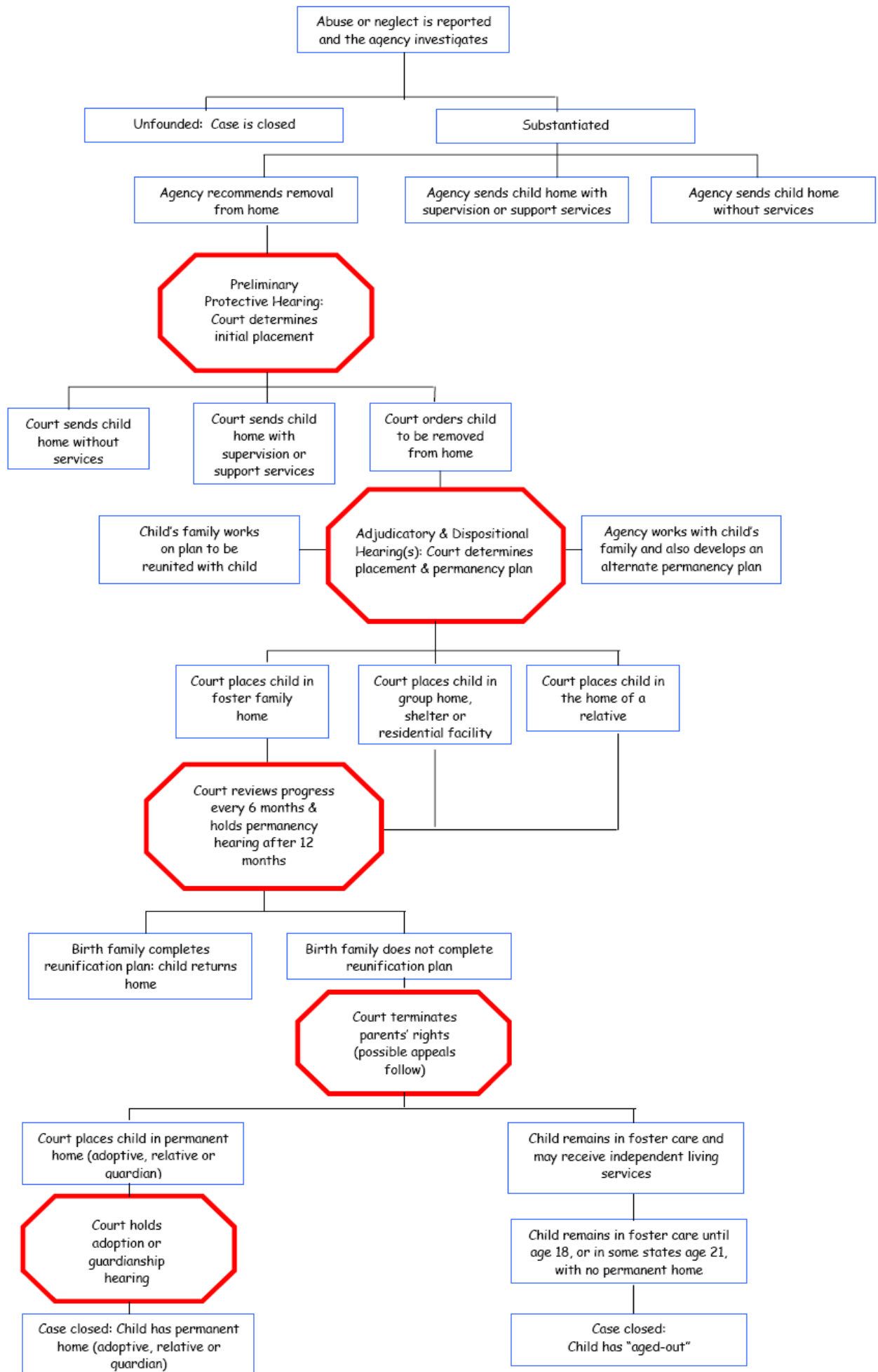
require foster care placement. Among these are poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, adolescent parenthood, as well as declining informal and extended family supports (Freundlich 1997).



Source: US Department of Health and Human Services. (2006). *Child Maltreatment 2005*. Available on-line at: <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/pubs/cm05/chaptersix.htm#post> (accessed November 9, 2007).

Teachers, followed by law enforcement officers, legal personnel and social services staff, are the most common mandated reporters of potential abuse or neglect (HHS 2009). From more than three million annual referrals involving the alleged maltreatment of six million children, more than 60% were screened in for a response and 22% substantiated entrance into foster care by the judicial system (HHS 2009). As outlined by the flowchart, the judicial system typically takes foster children through several stages of court hearings and periodic reviews before establishing permanency (Pew 2008).

A Child's Journey through the Child Welfare System



The number of American children in foster care rose steadily through the 1990s, peaking in 1999 at 567,000 (AFCARS 2010). On September 30, 2010, more than 408,000 children in the U.S. were in foster care (AFCARS 2010). Yet, the foster care system served 662,000 children during 2010 (AFCARS 2010). The fluctuating growth rate causes practice and policy adjustments related to case planning, decision making and service delivery, including education in the public school system (Barbell & Freundlich 2001). Nationally, 32% of foster children are between the ages of 0 and 5; 28% are between the ages of 6 and 12; and 40% are between the ages of 13 and 21 (AFCARS 2010). White children, who comprised 58% of all children under age 18, accounted for 40% of foster children in 2006. Hispanic children, who comprised 20% of children, accounted for 19% of foster children. African American children, who comprised about 15% of children, accounted for 32% of foster children (Equity 2009). Thus, African American children are disproportionately overrepresented in foster care (Equity 2009).

In a typical Midwestern state in 2011, 22,261 children entered the child welfare system, an 11% increase from 20,049 children in 2010 (SRS 2011). Of those coming into state custody, 4,895 children were reported as abused or neglected with 28% representing neglect and medical neglect; 25% physical abuse; 17% sexual abuse; and 40% psychological and other maltreatment (SRS 2011). In the same year, 2,285 children exited from the state foster care system: 57% for reunification with birth family; 19% for adoption; 9% for legal guardianship; and 15% for other reasons (SRS 2011). In addition, there are 16,184 children in the state living within kinship care or with relatives without either parent present, but not necessarily in foster care (SRS 2011).

Educational Experiences of Foster Children

Foster care students across the U.S. face a striking educational experience and trajectory, mirroring the larger population of vulnerable children (Walker & Smithgall 2009). Foster youth are more likely to have academic and behavioral problems in school (Smithgall et

al. 2004); higher rates of absenteeism and disciplinary referrals; and below grade level performance (Smithgall et al. 2004). Public school educators, along with foster families and other professionals, placed 25-52% of foster care students in special education, compared to 10-12% of the general student population, often because of learning disabilities or emotional disturbances (Siri 2008). Half of foster care students have been held back in school, and 46% do not complete high school (Berrick et al. 1994). Fewer than three percent earn university degrees (Siri 2008). Students in foster care face many of the following volatile factors:

Disruptive Life Experiences - Plagued with dramatic backgrounds, children who are separated from a primary caregiver and placed in foster care homes often have suffered abuse or neglect, and many have been exposed to family or community violence (Rowe et. al 1984). Due to these disturbing life experiences, these children suffer psychological trauma, attachment disorders, adverse coping skills and learning delays (Rowe et. al 1984). Furthermore, disruptions in the lives of children due to foster care placement interrupt and delay schooling during critical early elementary grades when children develop foundational reading and computation skills (Walker & Smithgall 2009). Foster care students can undergo circumstances sometimes causing them to miss days and weeks of school at a time. Frequent relocations result in switching schools, sometimes several times in one year. Nearly 70% of foster care students attended three or more elementary schools in one year, and 33% attended five or more elementary schools (Pecora 2006). Often, foster youth are give goals of reuniting with their biological families, but paperwork or court decisions hold up these proceedings and children suffer (Siri 2008).

Transitory Populations with Frequent School Mobility - Due to a lack of local foster homes and frequent placement changes, students often move schools and this transitory nature greatly impedes academic achievement. In one Midwestern state, 22% of students attend the same school after placement in foster care as prior to their removal from the birth

home (SRS 2011). Changing schools even one time means students are less than half as likely to graduate (Rumberger et al. 1999). Twice as many youth in foster care repeated a grade as youth not in care (Burley & Halpern 2001). Frequent school changes prevent educational progress, as shown by 33% high school foster care students earning a full set of credits each semester (SRS 2011). These disruptions negatively influence graduation rates of high school aged foster care youth with 19% earning a high school diploma or GED (SRS 2011).

Starting Out Behind, Failing to Close the Gap - A pattern of being old for their grade level and academically behind emerges early among students in foster care. Nearly one out of ten children involved with the child welfare system is old for their grade level in first grade, double the rate for other students. By third grade, the rate increases to over one-third of foster students being old for grade level then remains at this rate through eighth grade (Allensworth 2004). Less than one-third of abused, foster or homeless children scored at or above the median on reading achievement tests in third through eighth grade. Being old for grade level and performing below grade level standards have both been found to be very strong predictors of failing to complete high school (Allensworth 2004). The status of schools students attend also impacts foster care gaps. For example, the learning of students in low-performing schools lagged behind other students in the school system by about half a year and the learning of vulnerable students in low-performing schools lagged behind their peers in the same school by another half year (Roderick 1994).

High Rates of Discipline Problems and Behavioral Challenges - Students in foster care often react to their life circumstances with abundant emotions like anger, aggressiveness, shame or depression. These feelings lead to school-related problems such as apathy, ambivalence, skipping class, absenteeism and acting out (Greenwald 2002). Foster care students exhibit problem behaviors as evidenced by higher-than-average rates of school disciplinary code

infractions among the students, specifically one and a half to two times the rate of other students (Greenwald 2002). In many cases, the students were young and the offenses were serious; almost 20% of 6- to 10-year-old students in foster care violated the district's disciplinary code and two-thirds of these offenses were violent, such as fighting, bullying, or battery (Greenwald 2002). Punitive responses can reinforce the trauma to which students may be reacting and perpetuate a pattern of student behavior and adult response. Such patterns may increasingly restrict opportunities to learn (Greenwald 2002).

Special Education as a Primary Response - High rates of special education classifications characterize foster care populations. If a child is thought to need more services than are available in the regular classroom, school psychologists and social workers screen the student for special education (Smithgall et. al. 2005). Students in foster care were three times as likely to be placed into special education during the year they entered care (Smithgall et. al. 2005). Furthermore, children who experienced more than one foster residence in a single year stood an even greater chance of being classified as a special education student. The lack of birth family information makes it difficult to assess the source of a student's problem behaviors and distinguish between short-term reactions to life events and more chronic underlying conditions or impairments. Moreover, the vast majority of students retain their special education classification throughout their school years (Smithgall et. al. 2005). Rates of special education classification for foster care students in first grade were one and a half to two times as great as for their peers (Smithgall et. al. 2005). In another study, twice as many foster youth were enrolled in special education as students in the general population (Burley & Halpern 2001). By eighth grade, at least 30% of children who had had contact with the child welfare system were in special education, a majority classified as learning disabled or emotionally disturbed.

System Failure Impacts Student Failure - Given disrupted educational experiences and

higher rates of special education classifications relative to their peers, both of which often start at an early point in their schooling, it is not surprising that the high school outcomes for foster youth are poor. They graduate at rates substantially below their peers with only 30-40% of teens finishing high school. Of the 60-70% of students who did not graduate, most dropped out, but some left school because they were incarcerated (Allensworth 2005). More foster care students are sent to prison than graduate from high school (Allensworth 2005). Walker & Smithgall argue that public social service systems should be held accountable for supporting children's learning and working with schools to meet children's educational needs (2009).

School-to-Home Connections for Foster Families

Given the documented benefits of school-to-home connections and the exceptional educational challenges of foster children, it stands to reason that improving collaboration between schools and foster parents could serve as a potential source of enhanced educational outcomes for foster children. In circumstances such as foster care, school-to-home partnerships have shifted from a "luxury" to a "necessity" (Henderson & Mapp 2007). Increased attention to school-to-home connections for foster children provides a potential opportunity for improving results.

Due to infrequent educational involvement of birth parents or blood relatives during the placement of children in foster care, foster families become the primary stakeholders responsible for advocating for the student (Hudson et. al. 1994). To guarantee that foster children's educational needs are assessed and met, foster parents must ensure children receive appropriate educational resources; attend school as required by law; maintain placement in the same school whenever possible; and notify schools when children in placement move (SRS 2008). However, many factors impede effective foster family involvement in education.

For example, frequent transitions and lack of long-term background knowledge of the student put foster families at a disadvantage in comparison to birth families when advocating

for student needs (Kapp & Propp 2002). In addition, foster families are just one of many stakeholders involved in making educational decisions for students, complicating accountability and follow through: “There are 15 people responsible for my education, but not one of them reads my report card or calls my teacher” (Siri 2008:6). Challenges associated with a foster family’s transition into school involvement also include time delays in obtaining specialized support services; arranging and maintaining appropriate educational placements and services; dealing with significant behavioral challenges; establishing a stable home routine; managing multiple roles; and dealing with the system (Brown & Rodger 2009).

While foster families face these challenges, studies indicate they may be in a position to help coordinate social and educational services to help improve outcomes for students in foster care (Siri 2008). For example, the education and social work domains are rarely crossed with data sharing. As one psychologist said: “We have a wealth of information [about the student] that isn’t being shared, and it’s hurting the child” (Siri 2008:16). Since foster families attend to the day-to-day needs of the child and interact with both schools and social services, they may have the potential to serve as a bridge to enhance education in the best interest of the child.

Literature Summary

To summarize, studies demonstrate that family involvement in education has a strong correlation with student achievement (Mapp & Henderson 2002). Strong school-to-home connections can help improve educational outcomes in many ways including academic progress, improved test scores, enhanced learner engagement, better attendance, positive student attitudes and higher graduation rates (Sheridan 2004). Furthermore, schools can bolster student achievement by implementing programs to engage families in supporting student learning (Turnbull 2007).

Within the general student populations of public schools, foster children comprise a subgroup with much lower than average achievement, due to their disruptive life situations and

wellbeing issues (Courtney 2010). Foster families serve as the frontline caregivers for students in the child welfare system and face many barriers in ensuring their educational needs are met adequately (Brown & Rodger 2009). Schools and teachers also face unique challenges regarding foster children including extensive learning gaps, significant behavior disruptions and frequent transitions (Allensworth 2004; Greenwald 2002). Since studies indicate that all types of families can have a positive influence on student learning (Mapp & Henderson 2002), this study explores school-to-home connections for the foster care population as an avenue for enhanced educational outcomes.

Chapter Three - Methods

In order to understand the perspectives and practices of teachers and foster parents regarding school-to-home interactions, I implemented a qualitative research design to “discover and understand a phenomenon or the perspectives of the people involved” (Merriam 1998:11). My qualitative research used in-depth, individual interviews to seek to understand how others made sense of interactions, experiences and relationships. I used a purposeful sample selection to find individuals with certain qualifications. With my sampling procedure, I attempted to represent the diversity of foster parents and teachers with a variety of needs and strengths. I intentionally sought to collect data from as diverse of a sample of participants as I could.

Research Questions

Through this study, I seek to explore and understand the interactions and experiences of foster family and classroom teacher, specifically with the following questions:

- a. How do elementary teachers describe their experiences working with foster families? How do foster families describe their experiences working with elementary teachers?
- b. What are some of the strategies that appear to improve the interactions of teachers and foster families? What are some of the remaining challenges?

Data Collection and Analysis

For the study, I piloted two rounds of mini-studies before interviewing a total of 31 participants, transcribing the interviews and analyzing the results. I conducted the two mini-studies with similar research questions in the spring and fall of 2011 to gain validity on the interview tool and initial findings. As a result of the first mini-study, I refined and adjusted the wording of several questions to obtain more direct, clear and context-rich responses. I practiced capturing data to demonstrate examples of the phenomenon shared from the participants.

Based on the second pilot study, I changed the order of the questions to improve the flow and pace of the interview. These studies confirmed I was on track to gather data. The pilots increased my experience as an interviewer, and I received feedback from participants. From both studies, I identified the following focus areas: social and emotional challenges; academic accommodations; support systems; teacher persistence versus indifference; and family involvement versus apathy. Therefore with the use of a refined interview tool, I expanded the framework of these sections to build descriptions and implications contained in the dissertation.

In this study, detailed examples revealed the rich description of school-to-home interactions with foster families. As a researcher, I served as the data-gathering instrument, and data came in the form of words, stories, examples and case studies. Based on my purposeful sample, foster parents and teachers were asked a semi-structured set of questions from two separate, but similar, interview tools based on the perspectives of parents and teacher (included in the appendix). The interviews focused on obtaining descriptions of interactions and experiences to give context for the specific viewpoints of the respondents. I asked about perceptions, descriptions and expectations related to interactions. I sought to discover some of the academic, behavioral and social challenges. Follow-up questions were asked depending on responses in order to clarify.

I employed several methods of validity and trustworthiness. First, the KU Human Subjects Committee approved the research proposal to study this topic. In addition, consent forms were provided, explained and signed by participants (included in the appendix). Second, interviews were digitally recorded in their entirety and transcribed to allow for direct quotes to be integrated into the results. After completing the interviews, transcripts were provided to participants to ensure accuracy. This provided another opportunity to share reflections or feedback. Three participants changed or added information from these transcripts. Third, being

immersed in previous literature and personal experiences, I had a general framework for understanding the data.

Additionally, I started the individual and cross-case analysis immediately following each interview and kept a running account of notes in tandem with data collection as I continued the course of the interviews. After each interview, I summarized the major findings, highlighted key points and captured specific antidotes to transfer into another document containing comments, tentative interpretations and emerging patterns. Eventually, some of these patterns were overturned or rejected, and all were refined as more data was collected. This process provided for analysis and dialogue to find commonalities, as well as contrasting viewpoints, from the responses dealing with specific topics. These patterns helped illuminate the broader study questions and identify factors that might explain atypical responses or potential discrepancies.

Furthermore, I employed cross-case analysis to systematically compare and contrast the in-depth interview responses. First, the mass of data from the interviews was organized and meaningfully reduced and reconfigured. In the data reduction step, I undertook the process of selecting, focusing, simplifying and abstracting the data from the transcriptions. For the sake of manageability, I made choices about which aspects of the assembled data to emphasize, minimize or set aside completely for the purposes this dissertation. I found the commonly shared topics across the interactions by noting the concrete experiences and anything exceptional relating to the descriptions, strategies and challenges. I selected specific data representative of the whole to be singled out for descriptive purposes. While initial categorizations were shaped by study questions on the interview tool, I remained open to induce new meanings or categories from the data available. The selective winnowing was difficult and cutting redundant examples and stories was painful. Yet, I had to remain focused on relevant and usable data for answering my research questions. Data display was another

element I employed to provide an organized, compressed assembly of information. I created tables in documents to display a matrix that provided another way of arranging and thinking about the data. I extrapolated the data to discern systematic patterns and interrelationships. Categories emerged from the data that went beyond those first discovered during the initial process of data reduction.

Finally, I completed phases of verification and drawing conclusion. As I moved from unprocessed to categorized data, I shaped the story line of the analysis. I avoided prematurely leaping to conclusions by giving the data proper scrutiny before deducing meaning. I stepped back to consider what the analyzed data signified and assessed implications for the questions at hand. I revisited the data as many times as necessary to cross check or verify the emergent conclusions. I tested for plausibility, sturdiness and confirmability. I encompassed a broad concern for whether the conclusions being drawn from the data were credible, defensible, warranted, and able to withstand alternative explanations.

Again, my study employed individual interviews for elementary teachers and foster parents based on an interview tool. I asked both groups to describe their interactions with each other in educating foster care youth and provide information about their thoughts, motivations and actions.

Recruitment and Selection of Foster Families and Teachers

I used a purposeful sample selection to find individuals with certain qualifications, like experience with foster youth, for the study. First, I identified foster parents for the study in a Midwestern suburban region of the U.S. Every foster family is mandated to be part of a licensing organization, and I utilized a local association called Kids TLC (Transforming Lives in Crisis) to contact potential foster families. This organization frequently shared information with their families on foster child issues, trainings and new regulations, so families had a framework of

receiving information relating to child welfare issues. The Kids TLC director forwarded my invitation letter to the list serve of more than 70 foster families, as well as included the invitation in the monthly newsletter and a reminder, follow-up email. From the full list serve, 18 families contacted me to schedule interviews. Therefore, the selection of families was based on voluntary response to the study invitation. I screened interested families to ensure they had at least one year of experience as a foster parent with at least one elementary aged foster child. Of the families who responded, one had less than a year of experience and another only fostered older children, so I did not interview these parents. The sample included 16 foster families. To protect individuals and provide confidentiality, I did not have access to family's contact information. Foster parents contacted me to schedule individual interviews at their convenience.

Next, to reach elementary teachers for the study, the foster parents that I interviewed provided contact information for their school and any specific teacher they had worked with in last three years. I emailed and phoned teachers to invite them to participate in the study with an interview. In this process, I pre-screened teachers to ensure selection of only those who had recent experience working with foster families within the last three years. To participate in the study, teachers also needed at least four years of educational experience to adjust to the rigors of the profession. I obtained permission from district officials or building principals, and I interviewed 15 teachers in total. I contacted six teachers did not wish to be part of the study.

While some families and teachers may have been paired in current relationship with each other, this study sought to gather input from any teacher who had worked with foster families in the past three years, as well as any foster family with school-aged foster children placed with them in the last three years. For all interviews, a one- to two-hour time block was allotted in order to allow time for interviewees to respond and elaborate without feeling

rushed. Actual interviews ranged from 25 minutes to more than 90 minutes, and most averaged 45 minutes. Interview locations, such as classrooms for teachers or public places for foster families, were self-selected at the interviewees' convenience. Interviews were conducted in person or on the phone at the respondents' request. I interviewed some foster parents who I had previously met at training sessions, but I did not have frequent interactions with any of the respondents. I had never met or talked with most foster parents. Also, I interviewed teachers who are employed in the same district where I have taught for four years. Other teachers were new to me, and I sought to establish a trusting relationship with all participants to enable clear and specific data.

Within the foster care system, I chose to specifically interview foster parents, who are often in the most direct relationship with both the foster children and their teacher. Finding their perceptions and descriptions of working with teachers served the purpose of the study more closely than the information from social workers or judicial system representatives. Foster parents are often expected to relay all information relating to the foster child's education. For this study, I narrowed the scope to elementary educators to learn more about their relationships with foster families because these teachers often have the closest and primary connection to students and families. The roles of elementary teachers are quite different than upper grade teachers relating to students and families. I specifically examined the interactions of elementary teachers due to the increased time teachers spend with students in a whole school day, direct instruction of all academic areas and the overall nature of an elementary teacher's role. Most students in elementary grades were more connected to a single teacher, rather than a team of teachers. Likewise, parents saw the elementary teacher as the main point of contact for the school.

Foster Parent Participants

In late 2011 and early 2012, I interviewed 16 foster families, and I noted participant's

demographics in the table below. Among the foster families, I specifically interviewed 13 mothers, two fathers and one couple. Families identified the parent I interviewed based on who was mostly responsible for interacting with teachers. Though this responsibility often fell under the role of the mother in the foster family, I interviewed one stay-at-home dad as well as two other foster fathers who had been highly involved with school interactions. I was intentional in collecting as diverse of a sample of participants as I could within the representation of foster families for the study. Yet, my sample was initially homogeneous in regard to race, so I attempted to gather more diversity. After working with the Kids TLC director, I found a non-white foster parent to include in the study since many foster students represent racial minority groups. The participant sample helped show variety of foster parents.

ID #	Participant Gender	Two Parent or Single Family	Participant Professional vs Stay at Home	Years of Experience as Foster Family	Number of Foster Care Placements	Participant White or Non-White	Participant Birth Children	Public or Private School	SPED and IEP Experience	Adopt
1	Female	Single	Professional	5	8	White	Yes	Public	IEP	No
2	Female	Two Parent	Stay at Home	12	200	White	No	Public	IEP	Yes
3	Female	Two Parent	Stay at Home	6	15	White	NA	Public	IEP	No
4	Female	Two Parent	Stay at Home	23	200	White	Yes	Public	IEP	Yes
5	Male	Two Parent	Professional	8	5	White	No	Public	NA	Yes
6	Female	Two Parent	Stay at Home	3.5	25	White	Yes	Public	IEP	Yes
7	Female	Two Parent	Professional	3	18	White	Yes	Public	IEP	No
8	Female	Two Parent	Professional	13	20	White	Yes	Public	IEP	Yes
9	Female	Two Parent	Stay at Home	6	80	White	Yes	Public	IEP	NA
10	Female	Two Parent	NA	1	3	White	Yes	Public	IEP	No
11	Female	Two Parent	Professional	8	20	White	Yes	Public	IEP	No
12	Female	Two Parent	NA	5.5	3	White	Yes	Public	IEP	Guardian
13	Both Parents	Two Parent	Stay at Home	5	25	White	Yes	Public	IEP	No
14	Female	Single	Professional	5	3	White	No	Public	IEP	No
15	Female	Two Parent	Stay at Home	25	80	Non-White	Yes	Public	NA	Yes
16	Male	Two Parent	Stay at Home	7	3	White	Yes	Private	IEP	Yes

Overall, participants in the study represented families with or without other children in the home; single and married households; working and non-working parents; white and minority race; as well as public and private school families. Foster care experience ranged from two to more than 25 years of fostering children. The families averaged eight and one-half years of fostering experience. The families experienced a grand total of 703 short-and-long term foster child placements. Families averaged 44 foster children in their homes, with a range of four to more than 200 children in the course of their service. The presence of birth children in the home, years of experience and the number of foster care placements played a significant role in building school-to-home connections, as one foster mother shared:

In the very early years of our foster parenting, we felt like we had to ask permission to do this, that or the other [with the school]. We've evolved from there. At first, I was gun shy. But now for the most part, I just run with it. I just sign field trip permission slips now.

Family dynamics and other children in the home influenced the connections to school for foster families. Many families (12) had their own birth children, yet not all were concurrently in the home with the foster children since some were grown adults. Some families (7) demonstrated long-term commitment by adopting children from the foster care system at some point. All of these families continued to serve as foster parents with new placements. Their adoptees often started as foster care placements and eventually became part of their forever family with full legal rights.

Single, unmarried mothers led two of the families. They described the difficulties of life as a single foster parent, sometimes with up to three foster children in a placement at one time. Single mothers reported specifically on the need for the school to be a stronger partner and more invested in the school-to-home relationship than other foster families. As a necessity of balancing life's demands, a single foster mother said she relied on the village approach in raising children:

It's been challenging as a single parent. In the school system, if [my foster son] doesn't like a para or teacher at school, you can pull in someone else. But at home, I'm it. I'm beginning to see more reactive anger with me at home. I think he carries his anger longer with me. I rely on others in my [extended] family or friends.

Two-parent families faced their own set of dynamics in foster care. Even before marriage, most families (11) shared that they discussed foster care as a possibility for their future. For these families, foster care was a life vision from the start of their relationships, and they sought to make raising children a central part of their lives. For other families, foster care was delayed until their biological children were grown. A unique challenge in two-parent families involved achieving buy-in and partnership from both parents on an equal basis. In most cases, the wife promoted foster care and drew in her husband's support. One mother, with adult children, said:

I saw an advertisement on TV. My husband was sitting next to me reading. I asked him, 'Do you want to be a foster father? Let's go see what it's about.' He groaned; he's like that. But I made an appointment. 'Do you really want kids again?' he'd ask me. 'Yes, don't you?' We went through all of the trainings and meetings. We felt good about it; so we did it.

Parents discussed the impact of working professionally out side of the home (6) in careers ranging from college professors to office managers verses staying at home (8 with two parents not reporting). Parents said their working status played a role on their interactions with the schools because communication was intentional, to the point and shorter for professional parents who relied more on email or phone calls. Face-to-face meetings were scheduled for major concerns or formal conferences for working families. Working families said asked teachers to carry more responsibilities than with non-working parents, as one parent described:

If I didn't work full time, I could have easily been up to that school two or three days a week. Working all week, I had to reply on emails [to teachers]. A few times I was forced to go in to talk with the teachers. Sometimes, I had to – at the school's invitation – go in for a conference. But I want teachers to do more of it with discipline and work.

On the other hand, stay-at-home parents communicated the advantages of flexibility and more time in volunteering at the school. Many reported that the increased time at school helped them to build stronger relationships, as well as better monitor student progress, as one stay-at-home father said:

I could make myself available to be in the school. I volunteered in the library and read to kids. The teachers knew me, and they were comfortable with me. When there was an issue, I didn't need to figure out whom to talk with. I never interrupted them in class, but I'd just send an email and we'd meet up. I was a constant presence in the school.

Within racial demographics, one parent represented a racially diverse, non-white family. As a long-standing foster mother, serving for more than 25 years, this participant spoke of her ability to build relationships and maintain lasting contact with her foster children who are often from racially diverse backgrounds. While all families sought to build common experiences and establish connections as parents, this non-white mother said she felt she had stronger, more long-lasting connections, in part due to her racial identity. She shared:

Once we got a letter from a [birth] dad. It said, 'Thank you for taking care of my boys. I want you to be their godparents.' We also saw a boy who we had for a couple years. He's out of the system and 20 now. He looked us up on the Internet, and we see him quite a bit now. I have foster kids who come back to see me a lot. I've done the best I could for the kids.

All but one family attended public schools. This family opted to send their foster children to a private faith-based school: "[One of our foster sons] spent the first part of one school year in a public school. The quality of the teachers may be equal, but the commitment to the cause sure wasn't. You couldn't get everyone together. We couldn't schedule meetings or anything." The parent continued:

In the private school, there was very little staff turnover so you don't have to talk as much. Last years' teacher can catch up the current teacher. They get right back to you. But, you pay. We were the first family to have six kids in the school at the same time. We didn't go on a lot of vacations, but it was worth the investment.

Foster parents shared their motivations for serving children in state custody due to four main reasons: 1) faith-based inspiration from their own personal story or connection to a church ministry (10 families), 2) contributing to social justice and giving back to the community by caring for children (12), 3) wanting to expand their families (6) or faced fertility issues (4), or 4) having experienced the need for foster care as children when their own parents served as foster parents (3). Most families overlapped with motivation in at least two of these areas.

Participants shared about the varied needs, backgrounds and challenges of the foster children they invited into their homes. Showing the deficits of foster children who enter the classroom as students, families said nearly all children entered the system with abuse and trauma issues. These findings on a local level align with the larger research on foster student conditions and outcomes. Overall, the families in the study sample were representative of the population, showing diversity in marital status, ethnicity, working status, years of foster care experience, number of placements and motivation. The children they cared for were also typical of the larger population in foster care in their needs, behaviors and backgrounds.

Teacher Participants

In early 2012, I interviewed 15 elementary teachers to learn about their interactions with foster families. Six teachers that I contacted declined interviews for the study. The teachers, referred by the foster families, represented a sample from six suburban school districts and one private school in the area. They varied in gender, years of experience, grade level expertise, general education classrooms verses special education settings and public verses private schools. None of the participating teachers represented a racial minority group.

In the sample of 15 teachers, I interviewed two male and 13 female teachers. Mirroring the demographics of general elementary teacher populations, the teachers in this study represented a similar ratio in regards to gender. Generally, female teachers noted a higher emotional connection to students acting on “maternal instincts” comparing themselves to

mothers or grandmothers. Comparatively, reflecting a traditional “father” role, one male teacher spoke to the advantage of authority:

It helped to be a male teacher. [One foster student] worked great with me, but spiraled out of control with disrespect for [females]. It was just defiance. [The student] had a full-time [female] para, and he had a real hard time with her. He hit a level of disrespect. I’d say, ‘Let’s take a break instead of taking it out on her.’

Teachers ranged in experience from six to 34 years of teaching, totaling 300 years and averaging 20 years. Regardless of years of experience, teachers expressed their motivation for teaching was embedded with passion for serving students and their families. Most teachers (10) mentioned their desire to help “least of these” students, often labeled at-risk.

While most teachers represented public schools from six districts across a suburban area, one teacher worked in a private school. With support from the local community of her faith-family, she said the private school met the needs of the foster students she taught, yet faced limitations of working within a tighter financial budget and fewer staff.

ID #	Participant Gender	Current Position	Years of Experience	White or Non-White	Title Building	Public or Private School
1	Female	SPED	14	White	Yes	Public
2	Female	4th Grade	14	White	No	Public
3	Female	3rd Grade	29	White	No	Public
4	Male	6th Grade	4	White	Yes	Public
5	Female	4th Grade	35	White	Yes	Public
6	Female	Early Childhood SPED	18	White	No	Public
7	Female	2nd Grade	16	White	No	Private
8	Female	SPED	35	White	No	Public
9	Female	SPED	35	White	No	Public
10	Male	3rd Grade	4	White	No	Public
11	Female	4th Grade	28	White	Yes	Public
12	Female	2nd Grade	12	White	Yes	Public
13	Female	SPED	16	White	No	Public
14	Female	2nd Grade	12	White	No	Public
15	Female	Kindergarten	28	White	No	Public

Teachers in the study represented various grade levels: one in kindergarten, three in second grade, two in third grade, three in fourth grade, one in sixth grade and five in special education at all levels from pre-K to upper elementary grades. From early childhood preschool to sixth grade classrooms, teachers reported that the age of the child made a difference on the amount of family involvement. Typically, teachers noted more involvement at the younger grades, which tapered off in upper grades. One teacher said:

Family involvement has varied depending on the age of the kids. When I was teaching younger kids in early childhood, [foster] parents seemed to be more involved. At higher levels, it's varied. I have some that want to be involved and others won't call me back.

Teachers (5) in special education settings noted a high concentration of foster care students, like one 35-year veteran teacher who said:

Especially in about the last eight years, I've had an influx of children living in foster care. I've noted a distinct increase in the number of foster kids that I've had in my program, which is the designated class for kids with behavior disabilities in the district at the elementary level.

Teachers spoke of how foster students fit into the general demographics of their school population ranging from "a very upper-middle class school" to a "full Title building with both math and reading supports." Teachers in Title buildings (5) said they had additional resources to equip themselves with professional development and support staff. This quality made a difference on the amount of training and experience teachers had working with vulnerable, at-risk students.

This chapter provided a detailed description of this study's research methodology. A qualitative design was employed to examine school-to-home interactions between teachers and foster parents. In-depth interviews served as the data-collection method. Data analysis included a rigorous coding system and a thorough comparison was conducted using relevant literature,

interpretations and conclusions. Validity and reliability were accounted for through various strategies and oversight from the university.

Chapter Four - Foster Families Describe School-to-Home Interactions

School-to-home connections are important to the success of youth in schools. However, the development and effectiveness of such connections between foster care families and the educators who work with them may be different from general education populations in unique ways. How do foster parents describe their interactions with elementary school staff and administrators? In this chapter, I discuss key components of what foster care parents experienced as affecting their home-school connections, for better and for worse. Families shared stories on themes including: importance of early contact; two-way communication between school and home; classroom teacher's influence on relationship; generating learning and academic growth; overcoming emotional and behavioral deficits; and teams in educational decision making.

Importance of Early Contact

To serve high-needs children, foster parents described scenarios relating to their initial interactions with teachers and schools. Valuing education and prioritizing teacher and school connections, one foster mother noted her perseverance to ensure educational excellence for her foster child even from the start: "It's not what's good enough; but what's right. It's not what's adequate; but what's best." Committed to education as emancipation, a foster parent illustrated her efforts in helping foster children understand education as a path out of the cycles of dysfunction often plaguing them: "I absolutely support learning and school. Our mantras is 'your education is your key to choices.' If you want to have choices, you need to do well in your education now."

To meet these ideals, most families took immediate action when getting a new foster placement by initiating a connection with the school, even if the paperwork and details were

still unclear. In three general areas, families shared the importance of initiating contact. First, families expected schools to welcome in new foster students and guarantee positive interactions with clear leadership to share procedures and expectations. Second, families gained access to schools by creating new associations, like formally meeting principals, teachers and staff for the first time, or renewing prior relationships from other foster placements or birth children. Thirdly, families said teachers had to overcome a fear-based bias towards foster students. When these elements combined, families could initiate services much faster to serve students: “I knew [one foster placement] had a speech problem coming in. Before he was in school, I already met with the speech teacher. I could hardly understand him, and he was five. It’ll be his third school, so I wanted it all ready so he’ll be off running.”

Becoming Familiar with School Climate, Procedures and Expectations - Initiating a positive connection often originated with a school’s approach to welcome new families and students including transitory and highly mobile foster students. Most foster parents (11) noted the ease of the process, like one who has enrolled students in six different schools:

I’ve had zero problems and some pleasant perks because we are foster parents. I just very discretely let them know [about our new foster placements]. They took it right in stride and have been very ready to help. When necessary, the teachers have added communication on their part. The [teachers] have been a little lenient to help them catch up – especially if there was a recent move between one school and another.

Before students started their first day, most foster families wanted teachers to have at least 24 hours notice to prepare materials, their class and other details. One parent shared an example: “if they come in on Wednesday, they may not start school until Friday.” In many cases, this was the families’ first official opportunity to set the stage for the ongoing relationship, as one parent said: “I jump right in.”

Families reported clues indicating a welcoming environment to promote a high level of family involvement within the walls of the school on the first visit or tour. Schools featured

parent information centers, access to parent/teacher association membership, signage with upcoming events, high visibility of student work on bulletin boards, opportunities for family involvement in learning activities, as well as additional practices serving at-risk students. Tours also eliminated student's anxiety: "The [school] likes to show them where they'll sit and hang their bag. They show them the playground, cafeteria and library. For the parents, it also helps to know where things are at in the school." Noting the importance of an inclusive school climate, families said they valued office staff for providing a professional first impression. They appreciated easy-to-understand procedures and forms for enrolling students along with clear policies for obtaining proof of residency, records for immunization and past cumulative folders when available. A particular foster family said they observed the role of district culture on a specific building's climate in the enrollment process:

We didn't have any trouble at all getting them enrolled or started. Our school has a policy of supporting [foster] children and providing the best education. That's just the philosophy of the school district.

When the district and school culture embraced all students, even those in vulnerable situations, teachers were able to easily share their classroom protocol and expectations in the form of a website, packet or initial meeting. One foster mother said: "The school always worked with me, kept me informed and shared everything on the kids' routines. I can't say anything about them that's negative." Schools empowered parents with effective methods of knowing how the school operated and norms within the school culture. Several families (5) "couldn't believe the incredible" service the school provided to their children. Nearly all families (13) commented on the positive start of school, as one mother reported:

I didn't know what I was doing. But the schools were amazing. They walked me through everything. They were supportive – both the teachers and the principal. [The foster child] had a lot of behavioral issues. They were constantly talking to me. They really believed in him and wanted to see him succeed. Even at the very end, they cried when he left, and he was a lot to handle and love sometimes.

Gaining Access to Schools by Creating New Associations or Accessing Prior

Relationships - Families had to build new relationships (4) or rely on prior connections (12) to the school through their own biological children or previous foster children to gain credibility on their reputation of being a family supporting teachers, school events and education in general. Being able to confidently approach the school or teacher through open channels of access, families said they didn't have to wait for conferences or when a teacher contacted them. Nearly all families (13) felt like they could approach the school for any reason. At times, foster families reached out to make formal requests for meetings or introductions, as one mother said: "I just made an appointment with the principal the next day. I called the secretary and told her who I was. We met. Now, [the principal] waves to me." Informal meetings spontaneously occurred along the curb as students were dropped off or in passing in the hallways. Successful early interactions planted the seeds to a positive connection and high satisfaction.

While some families were new to the school or unfamiliar with a teacher, many parents (8) described the benefits of prior connections to the school. One foster mother said: "We've had experience working with the school. We have three of our own kids with ADHD, so we had worked through that." Another explained: "Because I already had my kids go through the school, I already knew the teachers from my biological children." Also, community connections played an important role in school-to-home connections: "The principal goes to church with us, so we know him." Renewing relationships of trust with existing staff and already being familiar with school routines helped families access the school in times of need.

Awareness of Bias Towards Foster Students - Some foster parents (5) reported that negative stereotypes clouded the judgment of teachers who reacted with fear-based mindsets to foster placements, typecasting situations for extra workloads, erratic social needs and demanding behaviors. Parents discussed the challenge and potential conflicts of merging

students from low SES backgrounds into the cultural norm of higher classes:

All of my [foster] kids struggled with fitting in with the white-collar, white, middle class [school] with high SES – I don't know if it's style or lack of diversity. They struggled with socialization. [Teachers and students] came across as snobby. It's so hard to come into a new school and new types of kids that they're not used to.

Feeling teachers were not giving at-risk students a chance, families said they struggled from the onset with unhelpful biases: "If some schools get wind that it's a foster kid, they're often like, 'Oh my gosh, we'll have to invest so much in this.' Sometimes teachers get the feeling that [all foster students] will disrupt and have awful behaviors." One mother noted the need for foster parents to step in to correct these stereotypes:

It's a shame [the teachers] have that stigma. That's where the foster parents are to step up as their advocate. It'll make the kids feel like they have a voice when their foster parents talk to teachers. Some teachers can handle it; but some teachers it's just not what they want to deal with.

Families expressed their disappointment when schools didn't meet their expectations or demonstrated inadequate commitment. Teachers sometimes made careless comments and displayed dismissive attitudes, as one mother said:

[Some] treat them like 'damaged goods.' I cringe anytime someone in the education system would call a child 'damaged.' [Foster children] are a handful; don't get me wrong. They're going to come with issues. You would too if you were torn away from your home.

Thus to summarize the role of early contact, families said they reached out to initiate immediate relationships with the schools and teachers, sometimes preceding the arrival of a student. Families shared the importance of contacting the school to learn expectations; meet staff and leaders; and help teachers become aware of stereotypes towards foster students. Introductions aside, families worked to maintain these connections under the stress of educating vulnerable, at-risk youth. Families said they attempted to make favorable first impressions with teachers, and they continued their efforts to maintain the relationship. Often

an open dialogue of two-way communication resulted from these first contacts.

Two-Way Communication between School and Home

Communication was the number one strategy foster families noted in casting a vision for successful school experiences. To keep teachers up to date on case plan changes, foster parents used their early interactions to share communication preferences, patterns and methods of collaboration with teachers and schools. Families noted that teachers might not be aware of how stressful home interactions can be with foster children. Foster families, with varying levels of desire to be involved, responded to the school with a higher frequency of communication, often in the form of email. Foster families researched and collaborated with teachers because their students needed flexibility, differentiation and at times a clear separation between home and school. Many foster families crafted solutions together with teachers to help blend similar expectations at school and home, as one mother said:

I share strategies with the teacher, so [the child] knows that the teacher and I are talking. The child needs to know that the teacher and parent are on the same page.

Varied Levels of Involvement with Schools Due to Parenting Stress - While most families (9) trusted teachers to handle foster students through the school day and report only on major trends or incidents, some families (4) said they wanted to be notified about every incident from the school day. One foster mother reported: "If anything happens with [our foster student], they give me a call." Another said: "We keep ourselves in people's faces, basically. Even with the bus driver, we say, 'Call if you have any problems.' They know we are there for the child, and we have an investment in them." In contrast to the cases of hyper-involved families, most foster parents wanted the school to "do their job." Foster families said they expected the school to work out strategies, interventions and solutions independently without "always calling." Families wanted teachers to adjust the classroom expectations to include

behaviors plans, extra accommodations and high levels of support. Foster families said they wanted to empower school staff to handle most minor matters, even if it meant relaxing certain preferences in the school or classroom, as one foster parent said:

We've had teachers recognize [foster students] need a little extra. Like when they are coming back from a specials time, like music, it's sometimes hard. So they let the child walk around the school a few times before coming back to class.

While some foster children played the part of a "beauty" at school, parents said they transformed into a "beast" at home. Other families (9) said foster children usually waited to release emotions in the most comfortable environment, so the home became a land mine field of emotional processing for foster children. One foster mother pointed out:

We had no problems at school; but there were tons and tons of problems at home. She had a lot of reactive attachment issues. She very much loved me, but I got all of the anger. She was fine and great at school; they had no problems with her. But at home, it was much, much more difficult. She had a lot of fear, anxiety and separation issues. I've been spit at, hit, bitten, kicked and more.

Thus, most families did not want to be involved in the school's work of educating foster children on a micro-level. They trusted teachers to handle their child during the day, allowing them to work at their own professions or care for others in their home. Rather than being called on every single detail and writing the child up on every flaw or struggle, families said they wanted teachers to "cut them some slack" and do more "forgiving and forgetting" of the foster student when compared to general education students, as one parent shared:

There were a lot of things we were hearing [from the school] that were not appropriate, but nothing compared to what we've dealt with in the past year. Part of me was like, 'Get a grip. Find a new way to reach her.' If that's the worst you've got – figure out a way to deal with it. You've not had the destruction of property that we've seen in the past year. It's those kinds of things.

Family involvement in school cost foster parents more due to more stress in the home. Foster families did not often have the free time, personal energy or resources to invest in school involvement. As expected, foster families noted the struggle and inner turmoil of finding

parenting tactics for the child. One foster mother reflected on the complexity: “For me, it’s very difficult to know how to parent [foster children]. Do you parent age appropriately or at their emotional level? There are times that he’s crawling on the floor like he’s two, but he’s really 11. [Teachers] say I baby him.” Families noted difficulty to create order for the child: “She was diagnosed on a social level as a two year old. Every once in a while, she’ll throw a fit like a teen. It’s really hard to parent her. You just don’t know.” Parents stuck to their core values of defining their family with their principles, rather than bounce from one idea to another. One foster mother said it was difficult to remain calm under the stress: “For a foster parent, it is easy to get into a nagging role. ‘Why can’t you just obey? Why can’t you just behave?’” To help cope, teachers often encouraged and supported the foster family, offering a listening ear or place to vent. Yet one mother noted teacher’s negative influence into the foster home:

I was hearing all of the negatives from the school. In return, her behaviors were really showing at home. I had to turn and really start choosing to see her for who she was. I had to enjoy her. The behaviors will correct themselves. Once she knows that we’re totally all in – that we love her, delight in her and believe in her – she will start doing the right thing.

Anywhere along the spectrum of experience, foster families faced a plethora of difficulties in staying involved and parenting foster children. The multidimensional challenges included the child’s past trauma and the unknowns of the future. Families also outlined the stress in deciding on medication issues with foster children, as one parent said: “Medications have probably been our saving grace because we had some horrible times.” Relying on medical opinions from doctors and often after consulting teachers, families made decisions on treatments with pharmaceuticals and prescription drugs. Teachers faced a fine line to maintain boundaries and focus on school relationships, venturing into the homes only when asked for advice. Teachers remained diligent and focused within the school day, not overreaching like one mother reported:

Once a teacher told me, 'I hope you find some consequences at home this weekend so she can have a better week next week.' You know, I was furious but I didn't say anything. It was really inappropriate for the teacher to tell you how to parent her. Her job is to come up with creative ways to work with her [at school.]

Changes and Updates Demand Frequent and Personal Communication - Families and teachers invested more time and energy in staying current with the numerous changes in a foster child's case plan, as one foster father said: "I know it's extra work for [teachers]. With [my foster student,] it was probably triple the amount of time." Foster families had to respect certain privacy and legal boundaries. One mother shared: "I tell them what I can tell them. It's important for the teacher and school to know. I don't feel like it should be a secret. It's not a crime that a kid is in foster care. I figure you educate the [teachers] and pull them in so they're in your corner." Without depth in a child's background, families said they were lost: "There are a lot of times the school may ask questions, and I do not have any of the answers. We didn't raise that child like a normal parent would with their kids." Another example happened in the enrollment process for one foster mother: "I've asked a kid, 'What's your sister's birthday?' That not the kids' job; they're kids. That's your job to look it up in the [documentation] and find it out." Sharing what they could, families said they expected communication to be returned in the amounts it was invested. Families wanted to be proactive and get in front of any issues before misunderstandings resulted in trust violations, as one mother noted:

At first there was an under load [of communication]. We didn't hear anything the first three weeks. Then one day, the teacher just exploded in an email. We were like, 'Whoa, whoa, where did this come from?' We had no idea. Don't wait three or four weeks to tell us things are an issue. I mean, keep us informed. We want to support you.

Digital Communication Preferences to Record Interactions - Foster families preferred communicating primarily through email, phone calls, paper notes or logs before scheduling face-to-face meetings. Once an initial relationship is established, most parents (13) said digital

communication was preferred, as one foster mother said: “Email is quick and sometimes efficient. I’m on the phone if the email is not expressing my intent. Face-to-face, is when I definitely haven’t gotten my point across. I do all three.” Email was the first-line communication for families to share about the ever-changing conditions of their foster student. On the other hand, one mother noted the potential concern about email’s privacy issues. The parent decided email remained the most convenient, painless and effortless method of sharing information. She said: “I do a lot of email because it’s easier for me, and it’s documentation. But due to HIPPA, I may not be doing that as much. But the school is a secure site so I email if there are med changes and those kinds of things.” Sometimes courts intentionally blocked information relating to foster children by sealing medical files for abuse cases or protecting others involved in the past trauma. Because email failed to convey tones and inflections, another foster mother shared about her preferences:

I usually try to talk with them verbally if it’s something really important. I’m not a big emailer. Emotion doesn’t come through. You can hear how emotional I am or the tone of my voice like if I’m really upset with you. You can hear it in my voice. For example, I went in to see the teacher because of how she handled a lisp [from no front teeth with one of my foster children]. I called first and talked with the teacher. But it continued, so I had to go in. I’m like, ‘Why are you not nipping this in the bud? You need to stop this – he doesn’t need this. He’s a good, bright, funny, little kid and he doesn’t need this.’ She understood with me coming in.

Other families (3), especially one retired parent in the study who was unfamiliar with computers, sent notes back and forth with the student sometimes in the form of journal or planner. The content of these notes summarized the previous evening or relayed information about status of birth family visits, medication changes or behaviors witnessed at home: “I may put a sticky on his folder, ‘He had a bad night. He might be tired. Or he’s having a rough morning.’ I keep it open to stay positive too, not always negative.” Often more formal, written notes traveled back and forth with the child to pass off the information in quick routines. Notes

prevented more time-intensive phone calls or meetings. Some foster parents (5), especially those with students in younger grades, signed some type of behavior log or journal each school day to share about the status of the students' performance.

Overall, families expected teachers to know their preferred style of communicating, whether email, phone or meetings. Families said teachers had to be flexible to know the routes to give updates. Families wanted teachers to find ways to appropriately deliver news:

[Teachers would] send really negative reports, and she'd hide them from us. We'd find them all over the house. The therapist said, 'Absolutely not. They cannot be putting her in a position to risk her relationship with you [as a foster parent]. They have to call or email the reports to you. She can't be put in that position.' We as foster parents want to know if she has a bad day. But, she is going to lie to us. We're her fifth home last year. We're still working on unconditional love; no matter what you bring us.

Families pulled these communication details together to record trends and specific evidence for case plan meetings or court-ordered reports. One family shared about the vital role of keeping the documentation for foster children: "All of the calls and emails were very helpful for us in documentation. We have a three-ring binder full of documentation. You have to have it to get services if you want anything beyond what the state wants. That's the biggest, most helpful thing; the documentation to make the case." Record keeping became a nearly constant need for families to collect data for caseworkers, therapists, medical doctors and the court system. Foster parents kept track of discipline referrals, grades, teacher insight and any other forms of communication from school to holistically show student conditions. In conclusion, families expected teachers to make note of their communication preference and stay in touch with more frequent communication, all the while documenting the frequency and content of the exchanges.

Family Research and Collaboration Trends with Teachers - As the school and home relationship progressed, some families (8) used their communication patterns to slip in new

ideas or ways of working with the foster child. While parents expected teachers to be educational experts, a few families (5) reported that teachers lacked instructional, motivational or behavioral strategies to work with foster children: “I didn’t want to tell the teacher what she was always doing wrong. It was like, let’s figure out what can we do to help.” Foster families said they expected teachers to be well versed in practices to advance intellectual development for at-risk children and proficient in applying interventions. Many families said they believed more interventions could be done at school, and they wanted to be involved in making these decisions. One foster mother said:

For one little guy right now, we’re working on decision-making. Once he has the opportunity to make the decision, he has to stick with it. We’ve been implementing that at home. [Teachers] asked about how we handle that, and they implemented it at school. So he gets the decisions that he makes and you stick with it. It’s those types of things. Everyone is on the same page. We discussed it with the teacher and back and forth. We all use the same form of corrections, charts or what ever it may be.

Some foster parents (8) completed their own independent research or shared plans from social workers or therapists to help address learning and behavioral concerns. One parent in a private school noted the need to educate the teacher, and at times the entire school staff, on the needs of foster students: “For many teachers, this is a first experience to work with foster kids or exceptionally hard kids. When presented ideas from our own studying, we found teachers saying, ‘I think I have other students who can get help from this way of teaching.’” Due to higher volumes of contact and closer connections, families said they gained a tight circle of trust with specific teachers: “You have to form a bond [with teachers] – almost like you’re almost friends with them.” One foster mother said this relationship presented a seamless and cohesive safety net for the child:

The child and I would go in together to talk to the teacher. We did it as a threesome; all three of us as a team together to try to be successful. I can’t tell you how much time we spent up there. Our youngest son slept in the principals’ office because we were up there so much working with the teacher. The [foster]

kid says, 'Okay, mom and teacher are on the same page. I need to be on the same page. That's the only way to make everyone happy.'

At times, foster child tried to create conflict between teachers against parents.

Sometime intentionally, the foster child played the discord to their advantage to refocus efforts off themselves. The families and teachers must be ready for the potential disputes, as one foster mother shared: "[Foster kids] often say, 'that's not what the teacher said.' You as a parent have to have contact with that teacher. If you see a problem like that, you have to go to the teacher." Families also said teachers needed to remember to reflect positive comments as well as the challenges. Families do not appreciate exclusively one-sided comments, seeking a mix of both strengths and needs. If negative comments became exclusive, foster families said felt bashed, as one mother explained:

I went in and said, 'Look, everything I'm getting every single day is negative. Is she a problem child of the school? What's the deal?' They said, 'No, no, no. She's not the problem child. We should be telling you good things too.' Just some of that kind of stuff. You get the feeling they don't like her at all. It's gotten better. They have shifted things and are trying a new approach with her.

From bringing in their own research to working together in tandem, foster families collaborated with teachers on everything from behavior plans to recess routines. They became close partners, open to trying new practices in their classrooms and attempted to be on the same page to prevent conflicts.

Needing Flexibility with School and Home Demarcation - Using the trust of close collaboration, foster families asked teachers for flexibility on school-to-home issues as they also began their new relationship with the foster child in the home. Especially at the beginning of a placement, some families (5) noted an intentional effort to separate academic and learning goals at school from the more fundamental home-based focus on building relationships and stability. These foster families said they drew a line between school and the home. Families said they often didn't always establish consequence for their foster children at home for infractions

occurring at school. The demarcation was largely due to a lack of a child's understanding of cause and effect relationship between the behavior and the at-home consequence, as one foster parent said: "If he gets in trouble at school, we try not to punish at home because where he is developmentally, school and home is too long of a time for him to make that connection. He can't process it. Yes, let us know about it, and we talk about it and go on." In an effort not to overload the often-fragile stability of foster children, families said they sought to establish the more critical needs of safety and home routines that were formally absent for the children before placement: "[We do] nothing structured [from school at home,] because we've really been focused on building the relationship."

Additionally, families sought areas where the child could succeed outside of school in athletics or the arts. Rather than constantly drill academics where most foster kids felt like failures, families noted the need for recuperation, rest and reflection at home after the school day. Families offered a balance between work time at school and down time at home. The foster home environment provided a place for foster children to be safe, fed, clothed and loved, perhaps for one of the first times in their life. To provide this kind of down time, families needed flexibility from teachers. One foster mother said:

When he first came, I told the teachers that we wouldn't do homework for a while. Period. It'll just go right back into his book bag. He needed separation between home and school. The first thing we had to establish was that he was safe and his needs were going to be met.

Overall in the area of two-way communication, families shared about the varied levels of school involvement. Families brought in outside research and background information to serve their student, allowing teachers to become familiar with the foster student's situation and eventually, as described in the next section, build a relationship: "[Teachers] didn't know her background, so they asked us to tell them her story. Being able to share some of her story gave them some compassion for the trauma." The families experienced a high frequency of

communication and preferred email with teachers. Within the exchanges, foster families asked for flexibility to draw a line between school and home to give students an opportunity for respite. One foster parent summarized: “We kept the teachers in the loop as much as possible. We want to work with them, not against them. We always tried to keep a good relationship with the teachers by communicating everything.”

Classroom Teacher’s Influence on Relationship with Families

As communication exchanges continued to flow back and forth, families developed and intensified their experiences in working with teachers. The classroom elementary teacher played a critical role as the front line of offense to impart skills and social structures. Families described the classroom teacher’s need to balance empathic compassion with flexible accountability. Families wanted teachers to never stop learning ways to tune into foster students to overcome teacher indifference. Through staff development trainings for teachers and professional learning communities, families noticed that teachers often worked on teams to generate learning and academic growth with modifications and elaborating on project-based learning for foster students respecting their life circumstances. Families said they wanted lessons with high levels of activity for both the academic and social advantage. Rather than the demanding focus on summative performance assessments, families said foster children need more instruction time with educations and less testing.

Imperative Role of Classroom Teachers to Champion Foster Children - Families said classroom teachers often became a champion for the foster child, not only academically, but for many other areas of behavioral and emotional development. Several families (12) noted that teachers provided a much-needed relationship in the form of a caring role model outside of the home. Even within a short time frame, parents described the considerable influence of a teacher who invested in the partnership, as one foster mother said:

The teacher just took [our foster child] in like she was part of the class. When I pick her up, I see in the teacher's eyes that she knows our child will be leaving soon, and it'll be hard. The teacher is outstanding with our child – almost a second foster mom, you could say.

When teachers showed a commitment to “do whatever it takes” to serve children, foster families reported feeling a strong sense of support, satisfaction and connection to the teacher. One parent noted the essential role of teachers in providing a caring relationship for the foster student: “The school is just extremely invested in [my foster child]. It's the personal investment – that teacher who cares or acknowledges something.” Another said:

Last summer – between third and fourth grade – his third grade teacher became his summer para. He was a male teacher and [my foster son] thrives and loves and needs male connections. He had the history with him and knew how to push him. He was fabulous. He even [arranged for my high-needs foster child to] play on his basketball team. The teacher went up to help coach. I asked, ‘Would [my son] be able to handle it?’ And the teacher said, ‘I'll be there.’

Beyond the child, teachers also helped validate, justify and motivate families, as one foster father said: “The teachers – from kindergarten on – have respected us for being foster parents and that has made a difference.” Foster families described proactive approaches of teachers providing an effective learning environment for the students. Families shared several ways they felt teachers were in-tune with the needs of their foster students. Families said teachers neutralized negative behaviors and drew on student's strengths with increased supervision and support. In noticing his small, positive choices and actions, the teacher-led team helped to reinforce social norms lost to most foster children due to the lack of establishing a normal routine in life. One foster mother said:

[The teacher] would tell me, ‘He just needs more attention today, so we're going to pull him into this class to give him help. We'll give him an extra hug or stickers.’ Whatever it was to help keep him motivated to stay on the right path. If things were a little wonky [with the case], the teacher would notify the principal who would say, ‘I'm willing to check in on him for the next couple days.’ He would intentionally find him in the hallway to give him high-fives. They were constantly trying to find ways to catch him doing things right. They believed in him and celebrated his small successes.

Foster families recognized and appreciated when teachers were motivated to go beyond basic requirements to do everything they could to support foster students:

[One teacher] would meet [my foster son] at the front door and walk him back to try to calm him down before they got back to the classroom [before school started.] I mean she worked so hard. She said that it was the first time she had a foster kid with as many difficulties as he had. She told me that it taught her to be more sensitive to kids in those kinds of situations. I can't thank her enough.

Families noted that personal relationships with a specific teacher, service provider or paraprofessional played a key role in helping students achieve academic and social progress. Foster parents said they appreciated teachers who took an interest, bonded and noted traits to share with families, as one mother said: "One [music teacher] called me in about a [foster] girl who had a good singing voice. She told me, 'Maybe she should develop that; she's very good.'" According to foster families, once the student bonded to a specific staff member, the student was often soothed by their presence, stabilized by familiar routines, willing to extend more effort and therefore take more risks. Thus, parents expressed a need for consistency of personnel to promote positive attachment for students who have suffered great instability in relationships. Foster families said schools should stabilize paraprofessional assignments and schedules because foster students need consistency and security. The success of working with the same providers allowed the foster student to make notable gains in overcoming the trauma of their past, as one mother shared:

He is in trauma system therapy. It's a collective effort of all the people working with him. He's been fortunate to work with the same resource teacher from kindergarten to fourth grade, and mostly the same team. The [resource staff] can tell when he walks in the room what kind of day they'll have with him. They are in tune with his facial expressions and body language. There's been a history that's been able to be built with stability of services and placement.

The effects of staffing and personnel also related to educational outcomes for foster students in some negative ways demonstrating a lack of skill transfer. In these situations, the

routines weren't used to help stabilize emotions and behaviors, but were engrained so that the performance or skill could only occur when the conditions were just right. This demonstrated a lack of transmission into everyday situations and life. One foster parent said:

The [teachers] were telling me at school that [our foster son] was meeting benchmarks in school, but he wasn't meeting them at home or out of the classroom. Unless it was in the exact right repetition by the paras, he couldn't do it.

Influential Teacher Characteristics Balancing Compassion and Accountability - Some of the virtues families noticed in positive teachers were empathy, compassion and accountability. Some teachers, regardless of their own personality, were intentional about seeking an in-depth understanding of the specific foster care circumstances and unique background: "The [teachers] do a real good job of taking an interest and getting to know each student and their situation."

Another parent expressed how empathy established a supportive atmosphere:

Teachers can help just by being understanding that the child is under stress that they're not in their home environment. I think that having an increased awareness makes a difference for the child. People have to understand that the child will have some difficulties to overcome.

Compassion allowed teachers to invest fully in the foster student with a vision of hope. Teachers' genuine sincerity fueled persistence in students and families to overcome challenges and seek effective approaches in working together. As teachers tuned into the needs of the students, families reported natural levels of heartfelt compassion and even love. One mother said:

We had an amazing teacher who fell in love with [our foster son]. She wanted to do everything she could to try to help him overcome all of the quirky things going on with him. She'd put in a lot of extra effort and come in early and stay after so he could work. He thought he'd never get anywhere in the world, and he never thought he'd be successful. But [in a letter he wrote at the end of the school year] he said, 'It's because of [my foster mom and teacher], that I think I can get into this world and do it.' [Fourth grade] was an amazing year of transformation for that little boy. The teacher just saw his heart. She could see the kindness of his heart and wanted to help him get there. By the time he was

in sixth grade, he was the Student Council president. It was mainly because of that teacher.

Yet, not all foster children responded to traits of compassion, and both families and teachers didn't always see returns on their investments. Even with love and support, the harsh realities of working with foster children sometimes prevent breakthroughs. One foster parent said: "No matter what you do, not all kids will take love. Some will choose not to, and that's their choice. We plant the seed and someone else can help that seed grow. It takes a lot of people to help these kids be successful."

Some families (4) noted examples of positive harm. In these situations, the teachers' attempts at extending understanding actually debilitated students who accepted and conformed to low expectations. Families explained that pity, a form of shame-infused sympathy, resulted in teachers not holding their ground with reasonable expectations, as in the case one parent reported: "[Teachers] wanted to give so much pity to the child that they didn't want to have any expectations. We didn't want them to be pointed out as the foster child. We wanted it to be as equal as possible." Families said teachers didn't intend for damage, however families appreciated when teachers challenged foster students at appropriate levels to encourage development. One foster mother said:

[One teacher] held my [foster] daughter accountable. [The child is] often sweet and shy and babyish, so it's hard. This teacher was compassionate and loving; but pushed her more. The teacher didn't allow her to say, 'I forgot my paper, or I forgot this again.' The [teacher] didn't let it go or let her give more excuses.

Another parent shared about how two different teachers interacted with a foster student, preferring the teacher who provided accountability:

One [teacher] gave her more credit than she deserved [and the grade of a C]. The other teacher gave her a D, and she earned it. That teacher was not going to give in. I think it was a good mix. I thought at the end of the day, the teacher wasn't helping her by giving her a C when she really failed. It was a little soft. The other teacher was like, 'I'm not going to let you scrape by.'

While family did not find a one-size-fits-all approach to the balance of flexibility and accountability, one foster mother compared the situation to her own child:

We approach it the same with what we'd want with our kids. We think of [foster children] as our own children. We take a very educated and direct approach to what the child needs. I'm not sure the school is used to working with foster parents in that way. It helps them that we meet them halfway.

Overcoming Indifference through Professional Development - Some teachers did not recognize or address student deficits, and a few families (6) said this must change with professional development. Foster families are required to complete multiple hours of trainings for annual recertification of their homes, and they spoke highly of the need for continual learning when working with foster students. Training opportunities for educators must be offered to find solutions when teachers did not find connections, draw students into lessons, discipline consistently or interact well with families. One foster father said: "[The foster child] was hiding in his books. He had no idea what you did in the classroom other than reading, so he avoided all interactions. It was easy to manage, so the teacher let him do it. The teacher needed new ideas to prevent him from doing what we called 'ghosting.'" Rather than investing in professional development to find solutions, a few families (4) said teachers passed on or covered up problems:

At conferences, we'd hear, 'She's below average, and we have all of these things in place to keep her passing in the 59.7%.' That is considered passing, but she can't write a sentence. That's just unacceptable to us. She is a kid who needs constant repetition. Teachers can't expect to just show her once or twice. It was frustrating to say the least.

When the school staff received professional development and worked with high-needs students, families noted an advanced understanding to know the inner workings of students' minds and greater respect for the circumstances. For example, if a school earned Title One status and experienced low socioeconomic families, the school often operated with many educational and behavioral interventions for support in staffing and resources. The school had

procedures already in place for run-a-ways, meltdowns and blow-ups. Several foster families noted a change in perception when the school included programs to specially serve vulnerable populations. One foster mother said:

The school housed an autistic program. The teachers were used to kids with similar behaviors, like screaming up and down the halls. It didn't faze them. They don't get anxious or panic about the behavior. It wasn't like, 'Oh my gosh, we have this child, and we don't know what to do with him.' It wasn't like, 'Our only option isn't the resource room.' They had all of that in place.

Researching new practices, attending workshops, watching webinars, taking classes, using technology, reading specialized books, tapping into the experience of colleagues, contacting outside professionals or working with doctors are just a few of the practices foster families mentioned for teachers. Dealing with the humanity behind each student and family, teachers became a major character in the life of a foster child. Families said teachers faced many challenges in helping to find solutions to generational challenges. Families said the unparalleled role of the classroom teacher gave distinction of a loving and caring adult. Balancing empathic compassion with flexible accountability, families said teachers utilized professional development opportunities to find tools to serve foster students. Parents encouraged teachers to embrace their role as a key influencer in the child's life journey.

Generating Learning and Academic Growth in Foster Students

In their description of school-to-home connections, foster families shared in depth on learning in the classroom and at home. Instruction, not testing, was the true focus for most foster families, as one mother said: "He was starting first grade and didn't know the ABCs or sounds or anything. That's way, way, way behind." Foster children, due to situations beyond their control, were given the "short end of the stick." Another parent remarked: "Kids in foster care have little to no chance of getting an education." Foster students did not have a fair or equal start to life and very few ever catch up:

The kids who are brilliant by genetics work and claw and grasp anything and everything they can get their hands on to try to make it through the foster care system to get an education. Out of the 200-plus foster kids I'd had, I can think of about four who have been brilliant [enough] to make it. But they will be swinging on a pole in a strip bar somewhere because there is too much peer pressure for those kids. They can't ever visualize being successful. Their mom's in jail; their dad's in jail; and they can't visualize beyond today, even though they are very bright.

Foster families said teachers found many successful methods of delivering the curriculum and developing new skills. Finding ways to promote academic growth, foster families shared about their experiences to serve their students: "It's about tailoring things that each student needs; customizing and recognizing those things in [foster] kids." One foster parent noted the high emotional cost and personal investment required to educate a foster child:

The problem was that she just falls in the cracks with her capabilities. That's the hard part. She knows enough to know she's different [and slow at learning]. It broke my heart that she's old enough to know that, and yet all of the curriculum is way above her head. I've been most frustrated this year because her needs are not met.

Adjusting Learning Environments to the Varied Needs of Foster Students - Some families (6) noted that certain teachers seemed to be better equipped to work with foster students based on their teaching philosophy, management style and ability to build student relationships. In the decisions of making placements within classrooms, families sought to have high-needs students matched with teachers ready for the challenge, rather than simply the class with the lowest number of student enrollment. One foster mother said: "Not every teacher can handle it in his or her classroom. It's nothing against the teacher. It's just knowing what their gifts are." Another said:

Let's be honest, all teachers have their gifts. Some can deal with scholars; others with behavior issues. I don't feel every teacher can handle foster children because they can't get past the stigma. But, I feel, when you select a teacher in grade school, you have to pick one with the compassion to understand that the [foster student] might deal with things differently.

Within the structure of the classroom, families said teachers often allowed for subtle,

non-disruptive methods of helping to connect students to the curriculum. To engage foster students, families said teachers must be ready to try new tactics and brace for more management concerns. One parent shared about their method of finding a physical, tactile solution to keep attention focused on the lessons: “[Teachers need to] know how to implement things like fidget toys and not take them away from him but use them when he needs to concentrate. Just to be able to recognize those kinds of needs to calm himself internally to be able to better focus and succeed in school.” Another parent said teachers approached potential conflicts in a new way with foster students: “They have lots of prompts for him. They give him time to deescalate in the sensory room or find a distraction for him.” These strategies serve foster students who have demanding needs.

Creating Adjustable Academic Modifications and Accommodations - Within the curriculum, many foster families (10) reported that teachers implemented accommodations on learning exercises. Often teachers allowed for shorter assignments or separate settings for testing for foster students: “If everyone needs to do 12 math problems, [my foster child] would just need to do three problems. Everyone in the room needs 20 spelling words, but she just needs to learn three words to be scored on. That was their way to solve the situation.” These modifications helped to shore up skills in an appropriate range based on student’s limited ability, while still introducing new content and holding the line on practicing and assessing their growth: “She had to write five paragraphs for one assignment. One paragraph can take two hours. It’s such a struggle. I try to minimize it the best I can, and it helps to have her modified work.”

While most of this occurred within the classroom, one foster father shared about how to modify work at home. He reported: “[Our foster son] was tenacious and worked for three to six hours every night. He could work on five problems when someone else could do 100. I would

cut some assignments in half. The teachers were always, “Do whatever you think.” Parents said some teachers wrote a blank check to families to try to use their judgment to modify assignments. However, delegating this task without clear boundaries or communicating it properly to the students resulted in more frustration. Families felt like the expectations were passed off too much to them, without the student really grasping how to handle these changes.

One foster mother said:

In sixth grade, the teacher was letting me change the assignments. Basically, I was in charge as to how much she could handle. It would have been okay, but she didn’t get it. I finally had to say to the teachers, ‘Look, it doesn’t matter what I tell her at home. She has to hear it from you. She needs it in writing from you. You guys have to modify it.’

Foster parents also said schools should plan for increased one-on-one attention for foster students. In the few-some-all models of MTSS or other differentiated instruction, families said their students often scored in the most at-risk category. One parent said: “She really struggles in that large group setting. I think she needs a smaller setting than with 27 kids. If she can’t handle the large group, put her in a small group.”

Creative Extensions for Foster Students Respecting their Life Circumstances - Nearly half of the families (6) said veteran teachers were stuck in the routines of similar “bake-and-serve” curriculum year after year. Teachers used the same projects and lessons without allowing for any extensions for the unique status of foster care students. Foster parents said they did not account for varied backgrounds in life. One family expressed major aggravation at a teacher who didn’t find ways to include the foster child in the project, as one foster mother explained:

Some teachers have the same projects every year, and they forget about how to work with foster kids. With one timeline project, he came home just in tears. ‘We’re suppose to have baby pictures, and I don’t have baby pictures. She just doesn’t understand.’ I said, ‘Well, did you tell her you don’t have baby pictures?’ He goes, ‘Yeah I told her.’ So I called her the next morning, ‘He’s not going to have baby pictures.’ She was like, ‘He told me that yesterday.’ I said, ‘Yeah, foster kids don’t come with that stuff.’ She was like, ‘Oh my gosh, I feel horrible.’

I really didn't handle that well at all.' 'Yeah, you didn't. You really dropped the ball on that.' She said, 'I'm so sorry.' It was a big deal to him.

Some teachers, however, offered alternatives and substitutes to serve foster students and the distinctive life scenarios of these students: "One of the creative things in the classroom is they took pictures of him doing what was appropriate because he can't read." Another parent shared:

She'd come back from her reading IEP time in the middle of what the class was doing. [My child] would be devastated, because she couldn't do it. She'd want to work on it, but the teacher would say, 'No, we've moved on.' So, I had to say to the teacher, 'Can we do something different? Can you send that project home so she can still do it?' Why does it have to be one or the other? It was like the teacher had never thought of that.

Incorporating Play and Activity in Curriculum for Academic and Social Benefits -

Classrooms where teachers embedded play, fun and activities into learning served foster children who needed extra skills in both social and academic areas, especially in early elementary grades. This overlap and balance of learning and play became a strategy to help students find enjoyment, satisfaction and motivation in school. Likewise, many families (9) expressed higher approval with teachers who used humor, games, recreation and play as a motivational force for keeping students engaged. One parent shared about the transition from pre-school to kindergarten:

At the beginning of the year, [our foster child] kept saying, 'It's not fun.' Preschool was such a great mix of fun and learning. So finally I said to the teacher, 'I don't mean this negatively towards you, but I think she's bored and not having fun at all.' The teacher snapped back. 'It's academic and not fun. It's kindergarten, and they have to learn. It's academic and not fun.' It struck me. 'Are you kidding me? What happens later?' I understand that there are academics, but you have to keep it enjoyable. I talked with some other parents about it. They told me the community is very much into their school and 'academic rigor' because they're pushing it so much. It's been a little bit hard for us. I think you could have a good mix of both, but they're too one sided.

This play-based learning also extended to therapy practices to cope with deeper challenges in life. These exercises, rooted in play, also put a voice to make of the unspoken and

hidden emotions, unlocking a method of expression to heal and communicate feelings. One foster mother shared:

[One foster] boy had anger issues. From counseling sessions, I would bring home the play exercises in how to get his anger out in a positive way. A lot of it was playing some silly things, like darts. You know, throw a dart for all of the things making you mad. After a home visit, this play was pivotal. I learned to ask, 'What were the things that really bothered you on the visit?' We made shaving cream balls and threw them against the fence in the backyard. We talked about what made him angry and physically let him get it out in that way.

Summative Performance Assessment Needs and Concerns - Often falling in the lowest performance levels, many families (10) said foster children needed more instruction time and fewer summative assessments. The abundance of high-stakes summative assessments had been a challenge for foster families, yet the shorter formative tests were viewed as driving grouping and instruction. The parents said they knew teachers must get an accurate understanding of students' skill. However with the high number of tests, parents said they wondered if the students were truly learning anything at all, as one mother noted: "They'd teach to the test. The teachers would get [my foster daughter] through the tests, but she couldn't do the work. In sixth grade, she got a superior in math, and I was like, 'What? She can't do any of this. How could this be that she got this score?'" Foster families noted additional challenges in the assessment-heavy system. One foster parent said:

Some kids were taken out for a solid day every week [for visits to birth parents three hours away]. [It] is so harmful when it comes to education testing. The foster kids are not being given the same advantage. If you miss a day, it can be paramount in building up in certain lessons. They don't have the same opportunities because they're caught in the dynamics of the visitations.

Thus, families struggled to manage schedules and shield the school day as much as possible from outside interferences from caseworkers, appointments or court hearings. Families said they knew teachers needed to use class time to instill skills. Some families also expected lessons, web-based activities and homework to be ready to catch the student up from missing

work: “Most of the time, I’m trying to catch them up to grade-level as fast as their little brains can do it.”

Overall, families said teachers generated academic growth by adapting the learning environment to their needs with great care to adjust lessons, homework and assessments. Teachers needed to give structure and scaffolds, often in small group settings. The families said teachers needed to find dynamic lessons filled with interactions and learning activities. Rather than focus on assessments, families wanted teachers centered on instruction to fill in the large gaps and help show high rates of growth.

Overcoming Emotional and Behavioral Deficits

Often the notable difficulties in meeting educational standards or reaching goals of academic advancement are directly related to a foster child’s lack of emotional and relational stability. One foster mother noted a school’s effort to help with learning by addressing social needs: “The [teachers] also tried to help socially, because [our foster daughter] was so far behind emotionally.” Barriers to cognitive and interpersonal growth ranged from lack of cultural capital, emotional distractions or lack of motivation. Families described their interactions with schools focused on overcoming social concerns with the need for many tactics to serve students within the areas of interpersonal, behavioral and emotional growth. Nearly all families (13) said hindrances in emotions or behaviors blocked learning, so teachers must focus on strategies for improving these dimensions of foster student’s lives, as one mother said: “If he’s worried about something, he really struggles academically.” Balancing this critical area of development with academic growth, families said they had to tradeoff to achieve any hope of moving forward.

Another foster parent said:

If he’s making gains academically, socially he falls apart. If he’s making gains behaviorally and socially, academically he falls apart. He can’t maintain that across the board. I have to give in a little bit and say, ‘I’m so glad you’re making

academic gains; I'm not going to let this power struggle get us off track or become hyper focused on this issue.' It is what it is.

Families and teachers worked to provide appropriate emotional scaffolding and supports. At both school and home, they attempted to deliver steady, consistent discipline in times of negative behavior spikes. Families also expected teachers to oversee the social dynamics of peer interactions. Parents often scheduled school visits and student observations to find out for themselves how students reacted to school environments. Families said the whole school became responsible for setting the stage for emotional and social wellbeing with supportive individuals who care, from principals to bus drivers. One parent noted the key to their success of providing security and comfort:

Everyone is so caring. The [staff] tries to learn every child's and parents' name. One of my little guys gets praise and rewards and extra kudos for everything he does, like holding the bus door open for others. They don't want the kids to fail. They want to set them up for success.

Modeling and Practicing Appropriate Emotional Management Skills - Due to the lack of emotional management skills, foster children often become hypersensitive or belligerent, and most parents (14) said teachers must be ready to handle these extreme reactions to feelings. Families said that teachers must have a much higher sensitivity when working with foster children for several reasons. First, children come to their classrooms with highly disturbed backgrounds. Often without bonding to a positive adult, the children do not have resources to help them regain acceptance and identify unconditional love. Expressing emotions did not come easily for foster students who often created stories riddled with dishonesty about their experiences at school: "As a foster parent, you have to go to the school because foster kids learn how to lie in a way they don't even realize they're lying. It's a self-defense mechanism. They don't see it as lying. They see it as defending themselves."

Another reason for emotion-shock on children is the uncertainty of the long-term case

plan. Courts leave ambiguity and vagueness in their plans on the timeline of transitions back with birth families or into adoptive homes. This time of transition demands many extra supports: “We let [teachers] be aware of what was going on in the process of going back home. That was a big thing with the transitioning back and forth on visits.” Likewise, foster students do not have skills to rebound if they are thrown off. The parents and teachers must be ready to “pick up the pieces” with a wide variety of issues, and they must not cause these types of upsetting issues, as one parent shared her frustration to clean up one of the issues:

One thing that was difficult as a foster child was that you can’t have her picture published. I remember one time, they sent a class picture book home. They had her picture completely blacked out. It was an error; they planned to send a different one home with us, but they didn’t. [Our foster child] was devastated. ‘Why do they have black tape over my face?’ We had to explain some of that. ‘You’re in foster care, and we can’t show your picture.’ I went to the teacher, and I was furious. I said, ‘Look, she’d been through enough. This can’t happen.’

Navigating Behavior Spikes with Steady, Consistent Discipline - Most families (8)

reported that foster kids often reacted harshly after an initial “honeymoon phase” and then exhibited drastic downward spikes in their behaviors often linked to changes in the case plan. For example on reintegration plans, foster children often “flared” after visits with birth families, around holidays and times of transition. Foster families noted that the teachers must be cunning and strategic to “not get played” when working with behaviors and consequences for foster children. Teachers must balance their empathy with accountability to improve the choices of the foster children within the boundaries of the classroom and school. Families reported that teachers must adjust their normal discipline routines to give foster students more depth of understanding to identify the causes and triggers. One parent shared how a teacher was unprepared to change from their routines in discipline:

The teacher’s only had two foster kids in 33 years. She is just not aware. The teacher has absolutely no clue what to do. We’ve pulled in [the foster care] therapist to educate the teacher and principal – not to excuse the behavior, but to help explain and educate why some of the things are going on. They are not

nearly as experienced with foster kids. She's not a bad kid, it's just the trauma she's had for five years.

Behaviorally, foster families said that students in care required full attention and demanded almost a round-the-clock diligence during behavior spikes. Often, this occurred outside of the classroom in a common school space, as one foster mother said: "When [our foster son's] behaviors escalated, it usually wasn't in the classroom; it was in the hallways or somewhere else. He needs to know the boundaries and where life is at now." After a few days or weeks, the foster students reached equilibrium and tried to test their boundaries by rebelling against the structures and expectations. Yet, some foster students skipped the honeymoon and reacted immediately with unpredictable, erratic behaviors in the first few days in their new setting in the school. One foster mother said:

On his first day of school in the middle of kindergarten, I got four frantic calls [from the school] that he ran out of the building. They couldn't find him. We needed to have a meeting immediately to make sure this school is appropriate. I thought, 'Oh my gosh, what have I gotten myself into?'

Another foster parent shared this about their introduction to the school:

One the second day of school, he lifted a desk and threw it over two other students sitting in desks at the teacher. That's how angry he was. Yeah, the school called, and said, 'We need you to come up.' Then the next day, he ran away from school. And I was like, 'Did you catch him? I don't know if he knows his way home.' They said, 'We're not into catching them. When they run away, they run away.' He was sitting on the front steps so obviously he knew how to get home. I had to take him back up to the school.

These two cases showcase the complexities of the first few days in the transition with bazaar behaviors and reactions. The foster parents shared general behavior strategies to handle such cases, yet they have "no magic, cure-all bullet." Families said teachers must be prepared to cope with strange types of extremities such as leaving school grounds or reacting with violence. Skills in defusing tense situations, calming students down, explaining the points of transition, laying out the expectations and processing through emotions are just a few noted by families.

Also, foster families said they must be included in these interactions. After the initial honeymoon phase, the families also discussed ways to work together on the on-going, long-term behaviors, such as violence, aggression, melting down, blowing up and general discipline.

Assimilating Socially by Developing Proper Peer Interactions - Families said teachers often helped foster students prevent bullying and victimization as well as find a secure social fit in the classroom. Most families (13) struggled with foster children fitting in and developing friendships: “I wish [my foster children] could develop closer relationship with the other kids.” Families said teachers paired them up with a special buddy or someone mature in the class as an initial point of contact. One mother talked about the struggle to create a safe environment for their student at school:

We had a hard time for them making and keeping friends. A lot of them struggled with the social piece. When we had groups of foster kids together – as much as they fought at home – they were very connected and would play together on the playground at school. They alienated the other kids.

The absence of even the simplest social customs was glaringly absent with foster children: “Remember, we don’t throw things at people because we want to be friends with them.” Some families reported a lack of ability to eat lunch with utensils, interaction with peers or stand in line: “[The foster child’s] past home didn’t teach her what was appropriate, so you can’t get on her when she doesn’t know. With foster kids, they’re not taught these things.” Another parent noted the details of appearance: “Clothes are a big issue. [Foster families] get compensated to buy them clothes. There’s no reason that they shouldn’t have everything they need to fit in – with clothes or shoes. If you want to foster, take them in and treat them like your own.” Parents discussed some of the routines of life, like hygiene and getting dressed, filling in missing sections of social traditions and norms.

Foster families said they feel like they constantly talked through how to get through the school day with their students. These repeated discussions, conversations, chats and times of

openness became a vital part of the strategy to find success. Families said they approached the situations with constructive and encouraging viewpoints. Avoiding negative choices and focusing on the positives was a common theme, as one foster mother shared:

We have one who likes to flood the toilets at the school, so we have to go over proper behaviors in the bathroom at school. 'Remember we use the toilet the right way, and when we're done, we wash our hands and leave the right way.' It's that, rather than drawing on, 'Don't flood the toilet again; don't put the paper towels down the drain.' It's more of the positive to set that in his head. It's just going over it and reinforcing it with the positive. It's those types of things; the constant verbal, over and over, repetition.

Bullying issues frequently came up. Foster parents said their students were often bully instigators because they've been bullied their whole life by adults. Students repeated those same routines with others who appear weaker. Foster students also fell into target categories due to the lack of social skills. Being victims their whole lives, they simply continued these traditions with peers: "No matter how bad something is, [the foster child] will never say anything negative about the [teacher or class]. It's just her mode of operation." This status quo mindset of keeping the peace by taking the emotional or physical abuse must be corrected to provide students with a sound ability to appropriately rely on peers, families said. One foster parent shared:

[One] child would always make it look like the other kids were picking on her. In reality, she was the one doing the picking and getting away with it. The teacher, because the child was in foster care, had more pity on her and didn't want to make her feel bad about the situation. The teacher would just push it aside, rather than make her accountable to what was happening for the other kids. The child was smart and knew how to work all that. The teacher finally saw that pattern, and she realized, 'Wow, she really worked me.' It wasn't a good thing.

Socially, nearly all families noted their part in helping children fit in, but teachers directly handled the day-to-day details in classroom. From being prone to bullying to shrinking away in a corner of the room, foster students didn't have the ability to form stable, mutually beneficial peer relationships.

School Visits and Student Observations to Find Accurate Facts - Many parents (8)

gathered direct observations relating to the emotions and interpersonal interactions within the school day was a key strategy in analyzing behavior and social challenges of the student. Foster families said they often felt like they didn't know enough about the full circumstance to identify triggers or find solutions, so they sought to gather first-hand observations, even in the extreme case of on-going, repeated visits to the classroom. One foster mother noted:

For one little boy, I actually went to half a year of kindergarten with him. Everyday, I was with him because he was so out of control all the time. Paras couldn't deal with him, and he was hurting others. So I suggested that I go with him. And I did everyday, even though I wasn't paid for it. He settled down and started learning. He needed someone stable in his life to be in the classroom with him, and I happened to be the person to him.

More often, foster parents caught a shorter glimpse of the school day, without an extended stay in the classroom. Families said they wanted to get an accurate understanding of what was happening to properly address the situation with a clear picture of the key times of the highest stress, so they needed to be able to see it for themselves: "The difficult part is to really know what's going on." This bridge of trust had to be built by both the teacher and parent to hold up the pressure of having an observing adult in the classroom and potentially evaluating their teaching methods and styles. Families said they did not want to judge the teachers, but rather find how the actions played out with behaviors or social interactions to help: "I followed the [student] around all day long. The [foster child] was not doing what they were supposed to be doing. The teachers were struggling, but they allowed me to come in and observe their classroom." One foster mother noted the alarm from the school on wanting to sanction off her ability to come into the school. This set off further concern for the family to find the root cause of the disturbances, as one foster parent reported:

I thought, 'Maybe I should just go and observe?' I contacted the teacher and school psychologist, and they both really discouraged it. They said, 'Of course, we'll let any parent come, but our concern is that [the foster child] is such a

problem child. But if you show up, she'll be fine when you come.' They really discouraged me from coming. It was at that point that we scheduled another meeting. Because honestly we didn't know what was going on.

Although rarely occurring, another single-parent foster mom agreed that an outside force in the classroom could change the behaviors of the student: "His behaviors change significantly when I'm in the room. He becomes very baby-like. My presence interferes with the teacher's ability to redirect. The teachers have said, 'He does fine when you're not there.'" Thus overall, families needed to work closely with teachers to help manage behaviors and emotions. The lack of ability to make appropriate choices set foster students apart from peers. Both teachers and families had to be ready for the challenges: "I will always advocate [for my foster placements]. '[He] came through a tough life. He's not going to be your typical little boy.'" The families said they diligently sought to share causes and the possible effects that could play out after home visits or changes in the case plans. One foster mother said:

We gave [the teacher] information about major things and what was happening in the life of the child to give them a heads up if a problem arose. Like if there was a visit the night before, we could see behaviors. It helped give the [teacher] a clear understanding about why they may behave the way they do. Instead of just disciplining for wrong behavior, [the teacher] could know the reason.

In summary, families described the unique needs and challenges of creating successful approaches to social opportunities supporting the whole child. Student peers were not always equipped to consistently provide the relational maturity or support needed by a foster child, so families said they expected teachers to be aware of the student's deficit of social skills to help keep peer relationships on track: "Every [foster] kid comes with a little baggage." When a student came home expressing social stress, families covered an array of basic topics, often several development levels behind the age of the student. One parent said:

We talk a lot about socially what's appropriate; making friends; good decisions; taking turns – all of the social things you'd cover with a 2-4 year old. We talk a lot about safety and hygiene things like to wash hands, wipe and flush. We talk about what it looks like.

Foster students struggled on many fronts: “Our six year old needed some extra help at school learning where it was appropriate to potty – not outside verses inside. He needed to also be nice to kids at school; he needed help with what was nice and what is not.” For many foster students, the social deficit extended into the home and put stress on family relationships: “[The student] did great at school, but I’m the one who had all of the issues with defiance. She did whatever for them, and they didn’t understand what was happening at home.” Again, after the priority of learning, families expected teachers to work together to overcome emotional and behavioral deficits. Teachers must instill appropriate emotional management skills, character lessons and consistent discipline. At the elementary school level, students needed help in building appropriate friendships, as well as learning not to bully or be bullied by other students. To help this to happen, families did not hesitate to sit in during the school day to make observations.

Teams in Educational Decision Making

Due to a large percentage of foster children needing special education services, nearly all families (14) talked about the process of working with an IEP. As a main liaison between schools and foster care agencies, foster parents described their experiences with the IEP process for their foster care placements. The legalities in each case differed. Unless courts terminate parental rights or birth parents formally relinquish their rights, birth parents have legal rights in the educational decision making process even while their children are placed in foster care. In either case, IEP decisions for foster students depended on educational advocates, which are trained representatives assigned by the state to oversee the IEP. In four cases, the foster parents served in the role of the educational advocate. Social workers, legal representatives, counselors or other professionals were also involved in the educational meetings at schools.

Most families (8) said the school documented and implemented special education

services for their foster children with proficiency: “Most of the time, it’s very easy. The school is very in-tune about what the child needs by the time we have our meetings. They tell you about what the child needs and how to go about getting it.” Yet for many families, IEPs became a source of tension for various reasons. In contrast to their overall interaction with the schools, nearly half of the foster parents (6) reported great difficulty in working with the schools in the IEP process. Teachers and school leaders did not fully communicate the overall IEP process to the families. Without a clear understanding of the whole course of action, the families said they became frustrated and lost. One family described the barriers that can stand in the way of determining exceptionality:

I had to really fight to get an IEP going. I said, ‘Hey, she needs more help than this.’ I wasn’t challenging them, but I said, ‘This is not adequate.’ The teacher was not sure how to help her before we got the IEP in place. We were all not aware of how wide the gap was in [her] abilities. She was not a ‘normal’ student.

The obstacles in working together included too little background on the child, too many professionals on the teams, not enough inclusion for the foster families to voice their opinions and too little motivation to get the IEP process started for a student who may be moved at any time. These factors impeded the end goal of serving the foster child and caused hard feelings, apprehension and distrust from foster parents on how to maintain respect for the teacher yet campaign for the foster student. The foster parents said they often had to push for the school to initiate IEP services. They also reported having to continue to advocate along the entire process.

Coordinating Collaboration Across Many Parties to Find Consensus - The IEP team of professionals for foster children was often larger, comprised more diversity, invested more time and devoted more extensive resources than other IEP students. Referring to the size of the teams, one foster parent explained the strength of being able to listen to and learn from various perspectives: “They’d ask for our input, and we’d set goals together. That was really nice. They

never made us feel like they were the experts. We truly were a team.” Overall, nearly half of the foster families (6) said they felt like they were able to be a central part of the team that drafted the outline of services in the IEP. One parent, who experienced a positive, student-centered approach, shared about positive collaboration in finding solutions to learning and behavior challenges: “We come into it with our concerns about the child. Everyone has wanted to make school better for the child, so I feel like we had a good team with everyone. We take it from the point of view of how we can help the child be successful.”

In contrast, other foster parents shared about the challenge of relaying a large amount of information and data to different parties: “It takes up time to explain it, and it’s a longer process.” Although data was needed for well-informed decision-making, it took extra effort to ensure all parties involved understood the paperwork. The parents also noted the challenge of bringing new parties or outsiders into the team:

Working with the whole team – PTs and OTs – we had camaraderie. It was harder to work with the [foster care] agencies to get things faxed back and forth. We had a lot of information to get from place to place. It could get lost in translation. Sometimes people wouldn’t understand it, so it could be very difficult.

At times, the many different players created confusion and ambiguity, impeding progress. To find a path forward in regard to educational law, both sides worked to find the responsible party – birth parents, educational advocates, case workers or foster parents – who could accept services and agree to the IEP. The school principal officially decided on services for the school, and the birth parent or educational advocate decided for the student. While voices could be shared from all parties, the principal and educational advocate or birth parent put their signatures on the paperwork depending on the unique legal status. Whether everyone agreed to the stipulations of the law or not, they had to comply. One foster parent said:

It can be a lot for the school to know who to have sign off. Is it the foster parent or the birth parent? In our case, the birth parent had to sign on all educational

forms. Anything educational, they'd have to sign off. Even though I'm the foster parent and directly involved with the school, I can't do education services. It's kind of backwards. That's just how it works, and you have to honor that. It can be a mess. It's a really tangled web.

When birth parents were required to be involved, foster families described the delicate relationship: "Then you get the battles. 'I know my child better than you know my child.'" One parent commented on a difficult situation in a highly sensitive case: "[The birth mom] said he could do all these skills before foster care. She was taking it very personally. She wouldn't call in for IEP meetings, so we had to reschedule those and his services were delayed." On the other hand, another foster parent noted the need to respectfully include birth parents:

[Birth parents are] still their parents, and [education] is their right. But if you get them on your side, everything will be easier. Our job is to do what's best for the child and their interest. So I try to get what I want in the end. You have to bite your tongue. You have the most precious thing to them.

Thus, teachers must also be ready to build relationships beyond the foster family with birth parents or kinship providers, if rights were still intact. Adding an additional stakeholder to the partnership, teachers usually took the lead from the foster family on how to involve the birth parents: "I think we've changed in the last ten years, it's very much more advocating to partner with birth parents. We do all we can." Another noted the need to share specific skills with birth parents: "Anything I made for my own children, I'd do for [foster] kids. They have a photo album from the first day of school to share with his parents. You have to teach [the birth parents] about that's what a parent would do. If you would take pictures of something, you have to teach the parent." Foster parents mentioned the need to work with the birth families to help model positive connections with the school in hopes of building skills and commitment for future parental support in the case of reunification. One mother said:

[Foster parents] have to build the relationship with the [birth] parent. The teacher has to build that too. They have to fill out two sets of paperwork. I didn't want the birth parents to think that we're keeping anything from them. It's like a divorce settlement. You have to let them know everything. They have

to feel that you are not taking the child from them. You have to make them feel like they're not lower than you. You have to build that trust, or otherwise they'll say, 'Forget it.'

Tuning into The Voice of Foster Families in IEP Discussions - Despite often being guests at the IEP meetings without the legal rights to sign and confirm final decisions, foster families served a central role of communicating about the child during the IEP evaluation, drafting and implementing processes. They often had to communicate with the birth parents and advocates who didn't attend meetings. Thus, the families needed to take on some leadership roles. A few parents exhibited aggressive leadership and take-charge attitudes. When they did, they altered the dynamics of the team-centered approach. Boundary lines blurred when foster parents demanded exclusive actions. One foster mother reported on her business-like approach to IEP meetings:

I felt like the leading person because I had the most information. I had the advantage. I manage an office of 150 people. I'm college educated and the whole nine yards. I'm not going to the table blind. I have always felt in control and that's good. I've never been challenged. I told them what was going on and what we're doing at home.

In another example, a strong foster parent become the driver in the IEP process, as a self-proclaimed tiger foster mother shared:

With the larger team, I remind everyone that I'm the one who lives with the child 24/7. So, I'll listen to all of the opinions, but what ever I say goes. I'm pretty strict about that. I may sound mean, but I'll listen to everyone's ideas and work with everyone. But if I feel like it's completely wrong, then I'll do it my way because I have to live with the kid. It's pretty clear-cut for me when it comes to that. I'm a very aggressive person when it comes to education. I'm very in your face about it.

Yet on the other extreme, some parents said it was hard for their voices to be heard on the IEP teams, either due to the many parties involved or not being seen as an essential part of the decision-making: "We advocated and advocated to try to get them to do an IEP for two years. They didn't agree that she needed special services, so she didn't get any. She could not

keep up. We again and again requested an IEP. It was very challenging for her to get an IEP, so she went years struggling.” These families noted persistence in communication as a key to overcoming this difficulty. The theme of pushing continued, even if the tone was meeker and gentler than assertive parents. One foster mother said:

I’ve been on those IEP teams when I feel like I’m just kind of on the outside and nothing is being accomplished. I feel like a loose spoke in the wheel. I’m one of those who doesn’t give up. These kids deserve the right to have a great education, as any other kid. Sometimes as foster parents, we have to push. Sometimes, it takes a lot more energy and more effort. You can say, ‘We need something in place so this kid can learn and everyone else can was well.’ It’s hard working with a team of people, and it can be very frustrating. But it can work if you keep pushing.

Nearly all families stepped up to give current observations from the home setting or status of the overall case plan with regard to reintegration or future transitions. A common obstacle was a lack of background information that accompanied a foster child. Yet overall, foster parents adamantly found ways for their voice be heard regarding a student’s past or present situation. A foster parent said:

Once at an IEP, [someone from the school] said, ‘Well, I don’t need to know or hear all the details of this student’s life.’ But I said, ‘No, I think you do need to know what the child is up against.’ It’s important for them to know. It’s often what even we as adults don’t have to deal with; how are kids with very young minds suppose to deal with these things? No one should have to, let alone an 11-year-old. So I insisted that this woman know what this young lady had to deal with so she could make sure the services were in place in the fullest extent.

Addressing Confusion and Misunderstanding in the IEP Process - For many families, the IEP evaluation procedure, testing framework and data analysis were unclear. Teachers did not outline the whole procedure without educational jargon to the foster parents. Foster families were often unprepared or confused by their encounters with special education services, especially with the amount of paperwork and requirements to establish an IEP. In attempting to start IEP services, some families said teachers steered them away from formal special education services for many reasons including short stays, accommodations already in place in the general

education classroom or lack of interest: “They just thought, ‘She’s a transient kid, and she won’t be here very long.’ But I said, ‘It doesn’t matter how long she’s here, she needs an IEP.’ I had to really advocate for her.” However, in a private school setting, a foster parent reported how increased flexibility in the classroom took the place of special education services: “We never did an IEP. I don’t think an IEP could do anything that our private school wasn’t already doing for him.” So at times, foster families said they felt modifications and differentiation in the general classroom sufficiently met the needs of the foster child.

Yet, if a child obviously required an IEP, the families often didn’t grasp the process of the initial evaluation and identification process for instituting special education services. Few foster families understood the technicalities and time involved from the school. Families said they felt disconnected and out of touch with the school on the process. They said they were not communicated to in a timely fashion. This adversarial relationship greatly discredited the school and took its toll ultimately on the student. One parent shared about the concern of how the school handled the foster student:

We did call a meeting to say, ‘Look, we’ve got to get on the same page. We have to know you’re for our daughter and not just against her.’ Three weeks went by, but everything was the same. I emailed the psychologist and principal. I said, ‘Where are we at on this IEP? What are we doing?’ The principal got back with me right way, and said, ‘We have a meeting on Monday. She’s on the agenda.’ The following week, I got an email from the SPED teacher telling us the new plan. It took five weeks after our meeting to get anything changed. As a foster parent, I don’t want to step on people’s toes. I don’t want to bash people. But in my gut, I’ve resolved that my job is to advocate for [my foster child] and not worry about their feelings. I have to call the [school] on the carpet when they’re not doing their job.

Though foster families faced many obstacles, they took pride in stepping up to advocate for their foster children. While most foster parents spoke highly of being part of the decision making process based on their experience with the child, some struggled to find their place by taking on too much or too little of a role. The families often shed light on the current ‘home’

situation and gave as much of the back-story as possible. Additionally, the foster family provided motivation for the school to know that someone cared and sought to ensure the child didn't slip through the cracks: "If I hadn't been pushy, it might have taken longer to put her in the right places. I said, 'We have to do something. We can't continue this.'" The families said schools responded with higher qualities of service and better teamwork when they, along with their teams, invested time to meet for IEPs. One foster mother said: "The best teachers for us were in the special needs program. I felt good about the resources. I certainly feel very, very blessed."

District Officials Help Alleviate Families with Weak Teachers and Administration -

Families who reported poor interactions with teachers sought administrator help to ease the pressure of weak school-to-home connections. The results were mixed. Some principals in these situations seemed to offer a more-balanced perspective to help improve or strengthen interactions. However, when tension occurred between families and teachers, principals often did not mediate effective resolutions and exhibited lack of follow-through: "He was the typical foster kid; with all of the horror stories and all these weird stories because he'd been treated pretty horrible. So we went to school, and the principal wasn't willing to work with me very well. The principal was very resistant, but we got the best teacher on the planet." Another said: "The [principal] wasn't willing to bend on anything." One foster mother reported incidents to an administrator when a teacher was out of line with her foster child:

One of my kids had some teachers who were not appropriate in what they were saying. The [teachers] were very insensitive to our foster kid. Because I had a birth daughter, one of the teachers said, 'How is [your foster mom's] real daughter doing?' Well, I don't think my foster daughter is fake. I wanted to say, 'All of my daughters are doing great.' I was not able to resolve that with the teacher. I moved up to the vice principal. She had a talk with the teachers, but I kept hearing they were telling my foster children things that were completely inappropriate and insensitive.

Some school administrators became a greater source of stress. Dealing with the complex demands of operating the entire school, families said that administrators seemed out

of touch. A few families (3) faced difficulties with school leaders, citing concerns with careless attitudes, delegating too much to teachers, pegging foster students as “bad kids” and not being able to establish a relationship. At times, families advocated for students by seeking resolution with school district officials: “When I have issues, I just moved up the ladder.” This approach resounded in another story one foster mom shared:

We had more hard times with the principal than we did with any teachers. I had to take it to the superintendent; it was so bad. The principal’s philosophy was ‘Once a bad kid, always a bad kid,’ and he always treated [my foster son] that way. When [the principal] said that to me, I looked at him and said, ‘Did you just really say that to me?’ He said, ‘Yes, and I’ll back that up.’ I said, ‘Great, we’ll talk to the superintendent then. You’re wrong. You’re so wrong.’ I went to the superintendent and talked with him about it. ‘If my son gets pulled into the principal’s office for any ridiculous reason, we will hire a lawyer. I’m just making it clear.’ [The superintendent] talked to the principal, and said ‘You’ve got to back off this kid.’ The principal retired a year later.

Finally, families served on larger teams to help find strong fits within the school structure, which often happened to be in special education settings. Families coordinated collaboration across many parties to find consensus and found their voice in the IEP discussions. Families gained clarity in process with educational advocates, even when weak teachers and administration attempted to derail the process. Families, who often partner with teachers, may be the sole source of oversight and most directly connected for foster children: “We’re their only advocates. We have to educate the teacher and be willing to make waves. That’s my big thing. I had to not be afraid to find a solution. I’ve realized more than ever my role as an advocate for them.” As another parent said: “They worked with me because they knew I was working with them.” Teachers often mirrored the families, so parents said they had to be “all in.” One parent summarized:

If I stay pretty in it, they’ll stay right in it. They’ll match me, pretty much. If I’m being aggressive, they’ll be right with me. If I’m lax or not giving much care to it, they’ll see it. If you’re going to be a foster parent, you have to do it completely. You have to do it all the way around. You can’t think the school will do it all by

themselves. You just can't. You have to be in there and learn where your foster kid is educationally and get them up to speed as fast as you can.

In conclusion, families shared about their perspectives and experiences as they interacted with elementary teachers and school leaders. This section examined how parents described their connections and partnerships with teachers. Parents approached teachers in many similar and different ways than birth families. Families established the importance of early contact; two-way communication between school and home; classroom teacher's influence on relationship with families; generating learning and academic growth in foster students; overcoming emotional and behavioral deficits; and teams in educational decision making.

Chapter Five - Teachers Describe Connections to Foster Families

Like foster families, teachers shared about their perspectives and experiences in building connections with foster stakeholders, including foster families, case workers, birth parents, guardian ad litem (GALs), Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA) workers, therapists, educational advocates and others. Teachers presented many aspects of school and foster family interactions that were different from their experiences with birth families. In this chapter, I discuss teachers' relationships with foster families and approaches employed including establishing immediate partnerships with stakeholders; striving for student achievement; emotional supports for foster students and families; behavior intervention strategies; and teams of support services and special education.

Establishing Immediate Partnerships with Stakeholders

Across all grade levels of the elementary experience, families played a vital role in the education process. Teachers expressed the value of family involvement for all students to find success at school: "My number one thing is the definite correlation; the higher involved the parent, the better-behaved, stronger academics, more respect and responsibility for the students. It is huge." Universally, teachers promoted the ideals of family involvement for all students, with many potential opportunities for families to be involved. One educator said:

I start an open-door policy at school with a beginning-of-the-year letter. The school certainly has programs like PTA, Watch D.O.G.S. and Site Council to try to involve [families]. If parents have any areas of expertise, we encourage them to come in and visit with students. We invite parents for lunch. We have volunteers. We have on-line communication and [texting and calling services] to blast out opportunities for parent involvement.

Most teachers (10) reviewed their relationships with foster families as positive and strong, mostly due to a partnership approach from the beginning of their relationship. Even when teachers reported challenging foster parent relationships (5), they found ways to interact with other stakeholders such as case managers, educational advocates, judicial representatives

and birth parents. Another noted:

The biggest challenge is building some kind of relationship with the [foster] child as fast as you can. Literally when they walk in the door, you've got to make friends with the kid and get them to do their best. If there is any tension, they're not going to show you what they can do.

Factors for starting interactions as immediate partners included consistent reciprocation with parents to gauge levels of involvement; involving caseworkers when families avoided school contact; encouraging interactions to build trust and transparency; and objective communication styles.

Consistent Reciprocation with Highly Involved Parents - Teachers built the strongest connections with foster families who seemed to take an authentic interest in their foster placements. Most teachers (10) said they had “gut-feelings” as well as evidence of actions when a family sought to make a positive difference: “The foster families I worked with have been wonderful, and they really have the interests of the child at heart. They want to do what’s best.” These families, appearing to be motivated by love and compassion, interacted with proficient ease in school matters. Highly involved foster families not only attended events like classroom plays, spelling bees and conferences, but they also stayed in communication with teachers via emails, notes, daily logs, phone calls or special meetings to ensure a smooth school experience. A few stay-at-home parents volunteered in the classroom or school, and others found ways to contribute to class events or holiday parties by sending donations or supplies. One teacher said: “[Foster parents] usually take on any kind of request or responsibility that we give them. They share insight that we need if we struggle with anything. For the most part, the relationship is very good and very candid.”

Teachers appreciated highly involved foster parents’ advocacy for at-risk students, and they spoke with admiration for the philanthropic endeavors to volunteer their home, time and resources: “If families are really trying and getting the [foster children] the services they needed,

I also try to my best. I am more understanding and empathetic.” Noting the magnitude of the sacrifice on the part of the family, teachers said they attempted to match the scale of magnitude with their levels of care and attention for the student. One noted: “I reinforce a positive relationship all the time. [Foster care students] respond better because they know I love them for who they are.” Teachers mirrored the level of interest of the foster parents to deliver their best efforts for the foster student. Building momentum like a flywheel, teachers said their increased efforts spurred families and the cycle continued. From the first conversation, most teachers reached out to support foster parents. One teacher said:

Our school really wants to help make [the placement] successful with a little extra care. It really does take a village. At our school, everything is deeply rooted in family. When you have a support structure like ours, we do what we can to help.

Involving the Case Workers when Families Avoided School Contact - Some teachers (5) attempted to interact with foster families who seemed to avoid communication or support for school. Teachers often responded with limited and cautious communications to these foster parents. Teachers said some families didn’t interact consistently with teachers due to potential factors like poor communication abilities, a lack of confidence in parenting or absence of time. One teacher said: “When I was trying to deal with [a foster student,] specifically on [foul] language at school, there was never a response [from foster parents]. We’d call and say, ‘Can you help me out with this?’ and we’d get nothing.” Another teacher said:

The [foster parent] wouldn’t return phone calls, and unfortunately it hurt the kid a lot. It was a very odd situation. I had to do a lot with the caseworker and work with her instead of the [foster] parents. I personally believe that the foster parents were in it for the money. It was a battle.

In these situations, teachers turned to caseworkers or educational advocates in the foster care system to make decisions relating to school. Teachers said the third party stakeholders were not ideal for collaboration since they had infrequent contact with the

students and many other cases to manage. One teacher said: “It took a lot longer to get things worked out when I had to go through the case manger instead of dealing with the foster parents directly.” Logistically, teachers went on to express the challenge when foster families did not uphold their responsibilities. One educator noted:

One time, when [the foster student] was sick, it took two hours for the foster parents to pick him up. And they were like, ‘At my job, I’m not allowed to be disturbed during the day.’ We asked ourselves then, ‘Why are you working with special needs foster kids?’ It was really hard. Obviously, they were not being very helpful. They were like, ‘Oh, we’ve got this problem,’ referring to the kid. In the end when things were finally starting to go well at school, they were having more trouble at home so they worked behind the caseworker’s back to get him moved from their home.

In some of these cases, teachers reported a potential for many negative implications on the learning environment. For example, teachers said foster students often disrespected teachers during the school day, especially in upper elementary grades: “[Foster students] tend to push you beyond the limit because they know you have no one to call to do anything about it. They’re completely free until 8:10 a.m. the next school day.” Teachers exercised their ability to report to supervisors in the foster care system to solve problems when foster families did not show support. One teacher said:

There was a day when we were going to send him home when he ran out of the building. He was doing other things that were unsafe. The family was not responsive. It made my job much harder. In his eyes, he thought, ‘I can do anything I want; you can’t do anything about it.’ So the case manager had to get a lot more involved. When she did, we were able to get him evaluated more in depth. We got him on some meds to take some of the edge off.

A few educators also identified specific foster families with whom they felt considerable reservations: “I have to be careful about what I report to the foster parents. Just because you’re a foster parent doesn’t mean you’re a decent human being.” One teacher said her concerns restricted further communication with one foster family:

We reported one little outburst to the parents. The next thing we know [the foster student] is going to [a children’s psychiatric hospital] with an arsenal of

medications they are forcing them to take. It all snowballed so quickly. We've not seen any issues at school that would ever warrant that kind of hospitalization. Because of that past experience with that [foster parent,] we filter information we give them, and it's intentional. We may not be as forthcoming knowing some of the implications could be at home for the child.

Gauging Appropriate Boundaries to Support Family Leadership - Educators worked as key collaborators with families, yet many teachers (7) remarked their role in the lives of the foster students needed to fall secondary to the foster parents. Accepting roles as supporters and “cheerleaders,” teachers said they had to follow the case plan and parents’ management of the foster home, even if they didn’t fully buy into the direction or methods. Teachers faced difficulty in following the family’s leadership because they formed strong emotional ties to the students who was often in “devastating need,” sometimes clouding objective, rational judgments. Rather than seeing the child through a professional educational lens, teachers attempted to bond with the student inappropriately, and it appeared to be a detriment. One reflected: “Instead of looking at [foster children] just as a student, you kind of baby the situation along – unintentionally. Your heart bleeds for them, and you want to take them home. You give them a lower and weaker standard. If they’re capable, you still give them an allowance. I put too much heart in it.”

Instead of assuming full control or charting their own independent direction with exceptions, strong teachers collaborated with foster parents and helped implement plans under the leadership of the foster parents. Most teachers said they benefited from appropriate boundaries to support the family’s efforts. A number of foster families (9) made the process of partnership easy by asking teachers for input on key decisions. One teacher explained the importance of working in lock step with foster parents:

The biggest thing for both of us [foster mom and teacher] was being the same. We tried to always be consistent and make sure we followed through with time outs, safe room or rewards. You couldn’t be wishy-washy. We told the kid, ‘You know your [foster] mom and I are partners.’ The kid really blossomed. The kid

went from someone always in trouble in fourth grade to being the student body president in sixth grade. He is one of our big success stories. He became a poster child.

Another teacher shared her view respecting the line between school and home:

I want [foster] parents who are willing to communicate. I want them to love that child and not just as an income for them. I want the family to treat [foster children] just like one of their own children and be supportive, consistent and nurturing at home. But my focus is on what I can control – that I want my classroom to be a safe place. I want [students] to make a go of it and be proud to say, 'I am part of this room.'

Frequent, Encouraging Interactions to Build Trust and Transparency - In terms of maintaining school-to-home relationships, most teachers (10) implemented small steps to make repeated, positive deposits in the relationship bank with the child and family. Another said interactions with families happened naturally through the course of a school day: "Face-to-face meetings were spontaneous at pick up or drop off and helped keep the daily progress monitored and in check." The teachers found creative methods to interact with families to communicate openly: "It was a lot of baby steps. It took so much to show [the family and student] that this was in a safe place. Eventually, [the student] could trust me and warmed up to me." Teachers provided multiple opportunities for families to share details relating to the student and home from emails, phone calls and notes home to making time when parents popped in. Teachers were a "listening ear" and empathized with parents to form the trust-bond: "It's like giving [foster parents] a tether of emotional support when they feel like they're floating." Another teacher said she ensured a recurring two-way dialogue:

It takes a lot to be open and allow [the foster family] to come and talk with you. Talking through things with them was important, and saying, 'Can we help?' Families are thrown a forth grader and have to jump development stages. They are really kind of like, 'What do I do?' So it's saying, 'Sure, my door is always open.' Foster families don't always know what to do or how to best help.

Teachers also found solutions to support the interests of the foster child through asking probing questions about the child's experiences and needs. One teacher said foster parents

needed to frequently share information with the school:

Sometimes you know the foster families are fairly restrained in what they share with you. Sometimes they're cautious or fearful. Sometimes you really wish they would tell you. One time a child was being stalked by the father who had sexually abused her. We realized someone was watching the school, but the foster parents didn't tell the school about it.

Teachers put in extra effort to make their interactions not seem rushed or focused on soliciting information. Investing time over weeks and months, teachers continued to maintain the relationship: "Building the relationship is key. Day one when they walk on, it'll start, but it's gradual. I have to make a lot of deposits." When teachers and foster families continued on in a strong relationship they could perform evaluations without blame to truly examine facts both at school and home for both the teacher and foster family to find approaches suited to the individual child. One teacher said: "Building the relationship was really easy. We were open to saying, 'Here's what's going on and what we're seeing.' It made the relationship open where we could tell each other about anything." Teachers provided ample time to learn everything they could about both the family and student with repeated, positive communication to build transparency. One teacher said:

Everyone has the right to learn in the best ways they can. I will do whatever it takes to meet those needs; whatever time it takes. With foster families in particular, building rapport with parents so there is trust with the good, bad and ugly with no judgment passed.

A history of communications and collaboration built up the partnership to have the strength to face larger issues. Teachers said that learning to trust the foster parents and building a united sense of team could help prevent erroneous decisions. Teachers and families together applied consensus-building skills, not only within the classroom but also in the larger case plan:

I had a foster student who was transitioning into a new adoptive home. The foster mom kept saying it was not right. I definitely wanted to respect her feelings, but I wasn't sure if it was just because she had him for so long. But it turned out that she was 100% right. The adoptive family fell through because they were overmedicating their other children. The foster mom was right on.

Objective, Blunt and Direct Communication Styles - Some teachers (7) noted many differences in the overall tone of communicating with foster families, often with more bluntness and objectivity than birth families. These teachers said they shared more candidly without causing offense to the foster parents since they have not raised the child since birth:

It is easier to go to this foster mom. I said, 'Hey, I straightened out those math problems. I don't know where she gets those ideas. I moved her right up to the board, but she almost needs to be in my lap when I teach. And you already know that, don't you.' Her mom laughed, and said, 'Yes.' I don't know if I'd say that to someone with a natural-born child. They might take it to mean something else. They are more sensitive about it. Right or wrong, I felt a little more free to work with this [foster] child.

Thus, teachers said they applied a straightforward tenor in communicating with many foster families. Teachers simply "ripped into an issue" and "let the facts speak for themselves."

One teacher noted:

Somehow, this may be confusing, but I'm just going to say it. I feel a little freer to talk with [foster mom]. She'd smile, and we'd have a laugh about it. It helps us get through it. If it had been their own child, I think some people would take it more personally if there were problems.

Another teacher said:

When it's a biological child, I really weigh my words. But sometimes, it's easier to be blunt about [foster children's] behaviors. The foster parents did not have input into how those behaviors started. It was more black and white. 'This is what the behaviors is; this is what we need to do to fix it.' It's more objective without stepping on toes. You don't have the, 'Oh, I was like that as a child' business. It's more of an objective feeling from their part.

Yet, the teachers also ran into foster families who put up their defenses, as one explained:

It seemed that the parents were very defensive. I tried to be very positive with notes home like, 'Could you please help your student with this?' I was very polite because he needed extra practice. Nothing would come back. I'd wait two or three days. And send it again. Apparently if I asked more than once, the [foster family] took it very personally. The parents all talk to each other and a teacher's aide told me the foster parents were mad at me. I thought, 'Really? Just because I sent the work twice?'

Overall, clear information from both the home and school remained a vital part of a

communication plan. Even when families took offense, teachers tried to remain objective in communication, finding ways to address issues with facts, evidence and data.

In summary, teachers discussed methods of building immediate partnerships with both highly involved and less involved families. Most teachers matched the higher levels of family commitment: “I see us as a team. I’ll do what I can on my end since I’m with the child all day long.” Some teachers pulled back with measured and filtered communication with select foster families. Others used continual, encouraging interactions to build trust and transparency. Due to the nature of ever changing case plans and challenges of foster students in the classroom, one teacher said they had to be open, honest and candid with parents. One teacher said: “There is more communication [than with birth families] on a daily basis. For obvious reasons, you’re working through so many issues [with foster students]. There are so many things you’re trying to keep up to date with.” Teachers also found boundaries to empower family leadership, and they expected family support in their efforts to serve the student, as one noted: “I can only do what I can do for seven hours at school, and if they don’t back me up at home, I’m just spinning my wheels in the daytime.” On the whole, teachers said their connections with foster parents, initiated from the beginning and maintained with unending communication, allowed them to work on issues of academics, behaviors and social concerns.

Striving for Student Achievement

To encourage academic growth, teachers applied multiple practices focused on student achievement. The teachers recognized and sought to close the bewildering gaps in foster student learning, as one said: “[Foster students] are really low and tend to be missing and lacking huge chunks of skills in math and reading.” First, however, teachers built a positive relationship with the student. One educator shared: “The [foster] kids have to know you truly care about them before you teach them anything.” Next, teachers adapted their styles to find

practices suited for foster students, like establishing structured consistency in the daily interactions and previewing upcoming transitions: “One blanket statement across the board is being predictable and consistent and letting them know what’s coming next.” Often, the pace of lessons slowed drastically, as one kindergarten teacher explained:

One little [foster] girl was so low, she couldn’t even test. Her trauma was so severe she wouldn’t even speak. It took her a year to even be able to talk. Come to find out, she didn’t know what a puzzle was. She had never held a pencil. As she watched the other kids, she got interested and mimicked them.

In this section, teachers specifically describe factors in educating foster children, including exorbitant learning needs and increased work loads; working together with families to engage and motivate foster students; sharing student data for instructional decisions; seeking family support for learning; consequences of transitions and disruptions; and the influence of involved school leadership.

Exorbitant Needs and Increased Work Loads of Educating Foster Students – Many teachers (11) noted additional workloads required to serve foster families and children because of their high level of needs. Teachers felt they attempted to meet the challenge by going above and beyond in an effort to help the student achieve growth: “My passion is helping children who are struggling. I meet each student where they are and try to understand them to build them into the best student possible. With the right tools [relating to academics in the classroom], we can raise them up a level and nudge them up to where we want them to be, but it takes a lot.” Extra effort extended by teachers in attempts to close a student’s learning gaps, improve their basic skills or decrease negative behaviors sometimes resulted in teacher burnout or exhaustion. Consequently, teachers responded to reaching their limit by easing up on some of their focus on these students to relieve stress and strain. The teachers had to balance the needs of the foster child with the needs of their other students to keep the whole classroom operational. When one student took so much effort, some teachers (4) ran out of ideas and gave up, as one sixth grade

teacher said: “The one [foster student] was always in your face. I tried to be as patient as I could. Then I just put their desk on the opposite side of the room.” Yet, most other teachers (9) decided to put forth the effort to perform the extra work. “[The foster student] does take extra management skills because she has issues. I work hard on it. I want the little girl to be able to overcome this. I want to do my best to not add to her problems.”

At times, the weight of responsibility in educating foster children applied pressure and tension to the parent-teacher relationship. One teacher said: “Oh yeah, [working with foster families] is incredibly frustrating.” Many teachers (11) struggled with the perception from the family that they weren’t doing enough to help the child at school. These teachers felt that families expected them to be able to “work magic” to make all the deficits and learning difficulties disappear. One veteran teacher said she never felt like more of a failure in the eyes of a family than with one foster student:

In 30 years of teaching, [this foster student] was the one kid that I felt like I truly failed. I did not affect his behavior or anything. He was a very severe behavior problem, and he ended up at a BD class. I didn’t do anything to help. I thought, ‘I failed him,’ or ‘The [family] hates me because I wasn’t able to fix him.’ But years later, the [foster] family sent me an invitation to his high school graduation. That meant more to me than anything because for all those years when I struggled to know if I made any difference.

Teachers conveyed that they took their professional role as an educator seriously to make every effort to identify students’ true ability levels: “I expect they purposefully dumb themselves down. If they show what they’re able to do [academically,] they know teachers will only work them harder and pile on more assignments. They learn to cope, manage and deal way more than we can imagine to get through life.” They often noted the need to employ a “whole new approach” to foster students with a concentrated effort to stabilize and secure the child, while still striving toward achievement and learning: “In order to get a feel academically, I try to monitor and include them in conversations from the class discussions to find their approximate

level of comprehension or ability. Often, they are so low, so I have to work really hard to get them caught up [to grade level].”

Sharing Student Data for Instructional Decisions - Academic achievement focused on universally screening students, analyzing the data and placing students into the existing structures of MTSS, usually in the areas of literacy and math computation. Data from school assessments and any background information on the child drove the teachers’ decision making to find paths of academic growth. Based on the data, nearly all teachers (12) said they assigned students to differentiated levels of intervention, usually with the all-some-few MTSS model.

Teachers noted that foster students usually fell in the highest levels of academic need:

Once their MTSS level is identified, we want to meet them where they’re at for their level of instruction and boost them up to grade level. Right now, I have one foster girl, and she gets three tiers of support. She gets the core instruction with everyone else for reading. Then, we do extended learning time. She’s pulled out again for a third tier to reemphasize. Yeah, they’re getting everything they can, and we plug them right in.

Teachers informed the families on these decisions, often not seeking input but simply sharing where the student tested. The low scores spoke for themselves. Families didn’t have much of a say, except to agree with the placements: “Foster children go through the routines of MTSS groups and everything. We require those parents to come to conferences. We call for extra meetings if needed.” Another teacher said foster students were given as much as they could handle academically, specifically in reading and math. One teacher said:

[Foster students] get the whole group reading. They have small group reading times and an hour of day with guided reading based on reading levels to work on skills. They additionally have Title One reading time for extra reading. We also have the structure in place for math. At this school specifically, we’re able to meet their needs and work with them quite a bit in small groups.

Working Together with Families to Engage and Motivate Foster Students - While teachers used existing support staff and structures during the school day, they also discussed creatively finding learning activities and homework assignments to be completed with the foster

family outside of school to secure extra practice and reinforcement of skills. Many teachers (9) noted their goals to empower foster families to help students advance and meet standards. One teacher said:

I feel like all of the [foster families] I've had truly love and care about these kids and take a real interest in what they're doing for their schooling. They take the time to get the kids caught up with homework and where they need to be academically. I've had kids who are behind in several areas, and the foster family asked me, 'What can we do at home to help?' They're great about doing that to ask for help from me. They get papers back right away and are really involved to keep kids going.

Teachers at younger grades in primary levels said they attempted to use homework as a method to create bonding and attachments between the foster child and parents. One teacher noted various games and fun tools for learning to do at home: "We have parents night and show them math games and things to do at home to give some extra support." Teachers intentionally planted the seeds of families helping students with schoolwork at home to benefit upper grades. The teachers in younger grades said this type of interaction with the school usually created very positive effects, helping not only the student grow academically, but also the parents develop closer relationships to their student and the school: "Often I try to use the homework as a way for the foster parent and child to have some face time. I encourage adults to help. It encourages them to be involved in the curriculum, and lets them know that education is important." Teachers who put a creative touch to their learning-at-home assignments and basic skills often reached into resourceful learning dimensions for foster students who struggled with mainstream methods of learning. One primary teacher explained some ideas for foster students to become immersed in core academic skills:

Often for foster parents, I put together a packet on great stuff we use in the classroom. It's not pencil and paper activities at all. We want them to have fun. When the kids gets in the bathtub, put some shaving cream on the side of the tub to do abc's or numbers. Or when they're finished at the table after dinner, put some salt in a dish to write out letters. It's practicing over and over.

Reaching into the home to focus on learning, teachers said a majority of foster families were helpful in getting extra help and arranging for times before or after school for informal tutoring. “They might ask, ‘Can you spend five minutes after school to show us how to do something again?’ I’m always like, ‘Sure.’” While teachers were willing, they faced resistance from some families. Some teachers (5) noted some type of struggle in the family working with assignments:

Sometimes I know the [foster] families are overwrought with stuff, so adding anything like homework is too much for them. It’s beyond what they have time to do. It’s tough. The [foster students] come in way, way behind. So often, it’s just a kid who will need some extra support.

Other teachers (4) expressed: “Homework is no different than a typical family. Sometimes kids really have [homework] issues. Sometimes families have issues with managing homework, but I can’t say it’s any different [for foster families].” Yet, most of the teachers (11) said traditional homework could cause concerns since the students often used tricks and negative behaviors to get out doing work, like losing papers, creating disorganization or playing parents against teachers. To overcome these challenges, teachers and families communicated back and forth concerning accountability for learning. However, when families lacked consistency, teachers noted additional struggles:

[Homework] is a problem. That’s a real problem. We don’t get homework back; we only see a small percentage completed. He’s just going to not do it. For the most part, there is not a consistency to following through on the part of the family to make sure the kid is doing what they’re suppose to be doing.

Consequences of Transitions and Disruptions - Foster students often fell in the cracks in the often frequent transitions between schools, teachers and grade levels, as well as various social workers, case managers or foster families. Even with systems in place to share data and cumulative files of information, some teachers (6) didn’t see a smooth hand-off in case plans or records from personnel in the state oversight system. They noted examples where the child

welfare system was “broken” and “dangerous” to foster children who lacked a permanent record keeping system leaving it to various schools and agencies. One foster student changed social workers multiple times, causing trouble for the entire team, including the teacher. The teacher shared about one meeting with the case manager and social worker:

I had quite a bit of dealings with them. It was a little frustrating, a product of the system I’m sure, but [the foster student] was working with one worker but then there was a change to a different one. When they changed, it was like playing catch up between the two of them. The new guy wasn’t up to speed on all of the issues. [The meeting] was more of us listening to the former social worker.

Another teacher said the system lacked conformity and smooth transitions:

Part of my concern was the disconnect [of oversight from case managers]. If the same worker would have been in the case the whole time, I think it would have been different. It was very fragmented.

These transitions of caseworkers limited the depth of relationship established with the student, family and school. One teacher shared about a life-threatening illustration:

[Transitions in oversight] all worked to [the foster student’s] detriment because his medical issues would have been caught much sooner if one person had seen the changes. His diagnosis was a very large brain tumor in the frontal lobe. He’d been in foster care for three years. Had the tumor been there before? We don’t know. Sometimes you just feel in your gut that something is not right, and I was always feeling that with him. When they removed it, he lost his ability to walk and talk. He’s been in the hospital for months. Things are looking better, because he is going to be an outpatient now. They did get all of the tumor, so they think he’ll be okay, but he is now having seizures. They don’t know if that’s the product of the brain tumor or he has other issues.

The teacher continued with the example:

I’ve never experienced something this bizarre. [The foster student] had everything working against him. He moved to a new home and a new school [in August]. We chalked it up to behavior issues because we didn’t know what he was like last year. If he was in the same school, they would have seen something in his behaviors. According to the [birth] dad, this particular foster mom just put him on medication after medication to control behavior as opposed to looking at the root of the behavior.

Thus, teachers noted the disadvantages of changing homes, schools, caseworkers and other transitions in a foster student’s life. One teacher noted: “We never know how long it’ll

last. All of a sudden they're gone. And it rips your heart out. Literally they just get picked up one day, it really sucks." These various effects of sudden and sometimes planned transitions held the child back from their full potential without a consistent influence.

The Influence of Involved School Leadership - Educators (12) said principals and school leaders were an important part of school-to-home interactions. Principals set the precedent for the school to value all learners and help empower teachers by equipping them to teach every student. Rather than islands of individual classrooms, principals ensured the entire school operated with the common objective of centering on each student. Influential principals also expressed care, vision and solutions for students. One teacher reflected: "Our leadership is fantastic. She is involved, caring and loving. She's all heart. You can approach her with anything." Teachers noted the perspective of an administrator to spread a vital ethos in building partnerships with families. A teacher conveyed the family-friendly culture and mindset cast by the school leader:

Our principal always tells us, 'Families are giving you their very best. They are giving you their most precious piece, whether they treat them that way daily or not.' She tells us, 'Think of your own children. How do you want them spoken to? How do you want them treated? How do you want them to feel when they walk away from interacting with you?'

As school resources have been cut back, teachers felt the burden with more demands, less planning time, fewer options for collaboration and additional tasks added to their responsibilities. Teachers voiced their concerns and some experienced leadership decisions that helped empower their ability to educate foster students, such as providing adequate staffing and additional professional development. These teachers said they admired how principals shielded many outside interests to protect the classroom as a place of learning. However, other teachers picked up the slack when principals were not engaged or involved. One SPED teacher said:

The principal I had was kind of clueless. She didn't understand or want to understand about the [foster] kids. When they're not willing to get to know the students like the teachers, they can't make a big difference.

In this section, teachers said they felt the higher demands of both classroom and home connections for foster students. Student data from screeners and continuing assessments drove the process of instructional decisions. Teachers engaged families to help motivate foster students to finish homework and learn at home. Teachers also shared about the high consequences of transitions and disruptions for foster students. Finally, they made the case for principals to be involved in foster student cases.

Emotional Supports for Foster Students and Families

Prior to even beginning to focus on academic achievement, foster students needed to feel secure and stable in their emotions and many teachers (10) noted the priority of focusing on emotional healing: "If they have lot of emotional stuff coming in, you have to take care of that first before you do the academics." Working with foster students and their families to sort out the various emotions was one of the hardest tasks for teachers: "[Foster students] have so much baggage, and it's hard for them to break down the walls and let anything come in – they're so used to being yelled at or punished and so on." As another teacher said: "I'd say emotions are the biggest difference compared to your normal child." Often anger and anxiety dominated the emotions: "One was so angry that he was uprooted. He felt abandoned." Teachers noted the time invested to meet basic, emotional needs of security. One teacher described:

So many [foster students] come from a past of severe alcoholism or poverty, so [teachers] have to get basic needs met first [at school]. The kids have to know, 'I will always have food, I will always have clothes or so on.' You know, it's not like, 'I'm not going to sleep in a car all night when [birth] mom and dad are in a casino.' A lot of overcoming that is making sure we get their basic needs met first – 'I will be okay and safe' – before we start to really work on academics.

Teachers said they encountered many barriers in building secure relationships with

foster students: “[Foster students] hate you just because you’re an adult or because you’re a woman, and their mom left them. Or they are angry, because they don’t trust men. You never know.” To work toward restoration, teachers said they attempted to establish authentic connections and provide stable environments. Some teachers said they were able to crack student facades, perhaps by developing a “sphere of emotional safety.” Teachers said they encouraged peer and adult social connections. At times, teachers said they experienced personal limits in facing the needs and created intentional distance.

Establishing Authentic Connections and Stable Environments - Teachers handled foster students with a different set of emotional expectations and standards than general education students. Teachers said they moved slower and allowed for validation through building relationships with each student. The unstable emotions and memories of past trauma can be triggered by everyday events, much like post-traumatic stress disorders. Teachers said they were often aware of these points in times of instruction, transitions, recess, specials, lunch and other times of lower supervision. From meltdowns to blowups, foster students responded to stimulus and adjusted in their own ways. One kindergarten teacher said:

The emotional status all depends on the kid and how much trauma they faced and the classroom they walk into. They’ll come in very quiet and reserved, often crying and withdrawn. At this age, as soon as they see you, they will come up in your personal space to see if you will invite them in or not. As soon as they see it’s safe, they’ll wrap their arms around you for a hug. One little [foster] guy I have right now, he comes up 10 times a day. They just need a whole lot of extra support of all kinds. You have to read the child. If they don’t get [emotional support,] they won’t learn.

Teachers said they commonly made connections to the foster students and their families. From eating lunch together, walking laps at recess or finding special jobs to help in the classroom, teachers attempted to aid in therapeutic recovery. Teachers also tried to bond through creative means, like singing:

One little girl wouldn't speak. She had been abused horribly. At school, we had a mouse puppet named Steward. She had a connection with that puppet. I would sing to her a lot of what went on [as I pretended I was the puppet]. Finally, the first time I heard her, she was humming along with the puppet. Then she spoke a few words to the puppet. That was the first she spoke to anyone; it was the first time she let her voice out. Once we knew she could hum, she worked with the speech teacher and then we couldn't get her to shut up. It was incredible.

Teachers said foster students contained many emotional needs: "I felt like he had so much on his mind. It was very difficult for him to focus. His mind was wandering, and he had so much to think about." Another teacher highlighted this example:

I asked [one foster student] what he was thinking about. He was thinking about his [birth] mother and if she was okay, and if she had a house to live in. It was very difficult. As a teacher, I was holding back my tears. I hugged him and just listened. I tried to help him along through that. I did talk to the [foster] parents. I feel like you should listen and validate their feelings. They were accepting of it, and it was normal and they were working on that. I certainly didn't want to pry, and I don't want them to wallow in it. There is a fine line.

Teachers focused on stabilizing foster student's emotional conditions. Teachers noted an array of emotions: "[One foster student] had some anger. They were bitter at what life had dealt them. You have to try to fill that by saying everyone has someone to deal with – cope and adjust, as we say. It takes constant reminders that they are loved, and everyone is coping and adjusting in some way." Getting this message to foster students required teachers to work closely with foster parents to ensure a consistent home and school environment: "When foster kids struggle with emotional things going, it's probably because of a specific reason in their past background." Another summarized:

My classroom procedures remind me of a movie where the nanny tells her kids, 'You is kind, you is good and you is important.' Everything at my school is like this. It is all connected. It keeps in mind [foster student's] emotional adjustments.

Cracking Facades by Developing Emotional Safety - Some teachers (5) noted a specific point when the foster student's emotional facade fell away with what they called a "sphere of emotional safety." Teachers said students changed and transformed to realize that the whole

world was not as cruel as they experience early in life. The conversions were never predictable or forced, but these changes marked a moment of revolution. Not every student reached this point, yet multiple teachers found this emotional “breaking” to be a turning point. The emotional release, recovery and acceptance marked a positive transition. One teacher said:

I call it breaking. [The foster student] comes in with a tough attitude. ‘I don’t care. I’m not going to do it. I’m not going to trust you.’ Then one day you kind of see that crack, and the shell will break. They turn to mush. ‘I do trust you. You do love me.’ Then, they come around. This is how life really is. This is how people really treat each other.

Another teacher talked about the emotional covering falling away for foster students of both emotional extremes, from being shy to being overly defiant. One teacher reflected:

Sometimes you’ll get a [foster] student who is very shy, afraid and nervous. And those who are not afraid and get their bluster going. They come in to prove, ‘this may be a new school, but I’m in charge.’ That is just a cover for being afraid. Either way, it eventually falls away.

Encouraging Peer and Adult Social Connections - To help the student emotionally, teachers often included foster children as helpers in the routines of the classroom to provide a feeling of inclusion and attention. Teachers recruited peer model students to help foster children maintain by providing extra support and guidance. Helping with emotional and social connections, teachers helped steer the foster student’s social connections in their classroom: “I quickly attempt to get them a buddy who they will enjoy being around.” Teachers said some foster children were “social climbers” and attempted popularity by being very outgoing and fitting into the social norms at the school. Yet, more often teachers noted a “social slide” where foster children congregated with other students also facing dysfunctions. One teacher elaborated on the diversity of social skills foster children present:

Socially, they are sometimes willing to be very open and try to make friends. But mostly they tend to hold back, and usually the class had to draw them out. Sometimes they gravitate to others who are withdrawn and whom they think are in the same situation as they are in. Sometimes a few are open and willing

to be loved, but others are more guarded. They are not going to open up so they think, 'Why bother?'

One school started a Star Buddy program for vulnerable students who were matched with adults in the building, from teacher aids to office staff. A teacher shared about this strategy to help model positive adult interactions: "Star Buddies take an interest in a kid. Sometimes it's just one-on-one to eat lunch or they bring friends. There is a lot of support and everyone goes above and beyond." Guiding friendships with peers and developing interpersonal skills for foster children took additional efforts for teachers to facilitate: "He was joining a class that was already settled in and built friendships. It was even more difficult. He was a very sweet boy with a good personality, but he had to adjust friendship-wise."

Finite Capacity and Intentional Distance - Universally, teachers verbally expressed their motivation to interact with foster families and at-risk students: "You want to help nurture [foster students] and make [school] successful. Even though you have the [student] for only one year, I treat it like a 'make or break' year." Yet, some teachers (11) expressed challenges in building relationships with at least one foster student or family. Without the normal life experiences of a typical American child, foster children became an anomaly, which created several layers of difficulty in building connections: "I don't know what it's like in some of their situations. They don't choose their situation. It's chosen for them, and the kids have nothing to do with it."

Teachers seemed to hit a limit in their willingness to work with foster families and students. Some felt like their role was never ending: "You're the mom, grandma, nurse, policeman – you have a lot of hats, not just a teacher." The teachers said they only had so much to give and knew their ceiling. When teachers crossed this self-regulated threshold, they didn't have the resources to go keep going with more innovations. The teachers also conveyed that foster families frequently backed off from being "all in." One teacher said: "With foster kids,

you're not able to rely on parents as much." A few teachers (3) noted a case of foster families who had served in the system for several years or with a large number of foster placements. The teachers reported that these families seemed to go through the motions of parenting without a true emotional connection. Foster parents, trained to be loss and attachment experts, seemed to caution themselves not to get too involved because fostering was only a "short-term gig." Since placements are designed to be temporary, teachers said foster parents frequently welcomed new foster children and grieved the loss of those moving on sometimes after days, weeks, months or years. Teachers noted the potential effects:

I think foster families sometimes are just as apprehensive about getting involved as us [the teacher]. Personally I want to give it my all and get this kid to be part of the group; to grow and change. But then he up and leaves. I'm like, 'I just put all of that in his kid and I'll never know what happens.' It burns you out. So now I guess I try to keep a distance.

Teachers noted prudence from getting too close to foster children and at times avoided relational intimacy if it wasn't returned from the child or family: "There are a lot of attachment issues going on. I think foster students feel abandoned, even when they're picked back up with love. You have to work so hard to regain that. It's scary for them." In these cases, both teachers and families backed way from the commitment and exercised restraint. One teacher noted:

I sense from the [foster families] that they're only doing what they can to a certain extent. They tell me, 'I don't know how long we'll have this child.' They don't invest as much. The child is just pulled out and suddenly placed somewhere else. They will only go so far. They feel like their investment is just short term.

In summary, teachers formed emotional supports based with classroom adjustments and personal connections. Within this allowance, some students overcame emotional obstacles and found healing, while others continued to put up walls. Teachers also encouraged peer and adult social connections to aid in emotional stabilization. However, teachers also ran into personal limits and at times ended up creating intentional distance between themselves and the

foster family.

Behavior Intervention Strategies

Foster students presented a number of behavior and discipline struggles ranging from violence to defiance to solitude. Teachers found strategies to face and overcome these barriers to learning. One special education teacher said: “It is my job to find ways to help kids with hard behaviors, and that’s what I’ve been trained for. I have seen the whole gamut, and every [foster] kid is different in how they deal with the loss of their family and any abuse or neglect. Every kid is individual.” As foster students presented unique behavior issues, they each required a different approach to manage or improve behaviors, nearly always involving their families:

At school, we have [foster] kids that are angry, aggressive or runners. My strategies are not just something that I pull out a drawer. It’s thing after thing. That is what my job is, and it looks different for each kid. Two kids with the same behaviors might have two different plans depending on what is going on for them.

Teachers discussed behavior models to specifically teach the guidelines expected in school. They found appropriate consequences to scaffold improvement, as well as establishing student accountability with family support. Teachers also used other professionals in the district and the larger foster care team to find solutions and advice.

Employing Positive Behavior Instructional Support Models - Most teachers (11) took an approach in the spirit of their schools’ PBIS initiatives to deal with behaviors in areas like standing in line for the drinking fountain, recess habits and lunch line routines. Teachers highlighted the target types of choices expected in classrooms and schools. If teachers witnessed a budding virtue in one of these areas, they capitalized on making an example of it with encouragement and celebration, especially when knowing the personal side of foster students’ lives. One teacher shared: “Lots of times when kids are in foster care, education is not their first priority. It’s hard to get a kid motivated [to behave in school] when he’s been removed

from the home and his life is in turmoil. Just getting them focused on what they're supposed to be doing is huge." Another teacher noted the importance of a personal relationship with foster students: "It takes a lot of patience. It takes getting to know them with one-on-one talks. Assuring them about this is the way we do it here [at school]." Teachers also found natural consequences to avoid the student perceiving arbitrary punishment. Many emphasized the importance of helping students achieve a higher quality of life with research-validated behavioral sciences instruction. One teacher gave an overview of his approach to the PBIS model:

My philosophy is positive, positive, positive. If we get to the point where it gets to a consequence, we want to make it a teachable moment with a logical consequence and not just a punitive punishment. With foster kids, it's important to keep in mind their background and history to seek out explanations.

Several teachers mentioned character education curriculum and teambuilding activities to create a strong classroom community. Creating open forums in upper elementary grades to discuss behaviors was one strategy: "We have class meetings if we have a lot of specific issues. We can target any specific areas." Teachers also said they modeled better behaviors and ways to handle common scenarios: "The students have to look at each other and know they'll treat each other kind and fair. It's back to basic morals. It sounds goofy, but in third grade it's amazing that they have so much to work on." Teachers also noted fluctuation with highly variable behaviors:

I see the roller coaster effect where our foster kids will be fine and dandy for a long time, but then something changes. It turns their world upside down again. All of a sudden, we have all kinds of behaviors. It's like trying to calm them down.

The "roller coast effect" within foster students was often linked to what was happening in life outside of school. From visits with the birth family to cycles of healing from past abuse, the children faced multiple rounds of disruptions even in the most stable foster homes. These

unsettling disturbances played out in their classroom behaviors. Teachers researched the causes of the behaviors to find positive solutions: “Unfortunately, with behavior, there is a lot of grey area. With foster care, it’s even murkier. You take it case-by-case and student-by-student.”

Rather than relying on a blanket standard, each student required flexibility to fit his or her case:

[With foster students], I am more patient and understanding. Even in my school with a lot of economic diversity, there are more frequent discipline issues with kids coming from foster care. Their life is in crisis, and the only way they know to handle it is by acting out. It’s an attention thing. It’s a difficult balancing act. You can’t let them be disruptive for the whole class you have to deal with it in ways to help them learn from it all.

Teachers said it was sometimes difficult to stay positive with students as they: “work through so many insecurities and issues. [Foster children] have worries, burdens and memories. A child shouldn’t have to cope with all that. So while I’m there to teach them, I have to take everything that comes with them.” In these situations, teachers again reported they appreciated the PBIS model to deal with specific behaviors like hallway procedures, lunchroom protocol and classroom learning expectations.

Finding Appropriate Consequences to Scaffold Improvement - After teachers explicitly taught behaviors they expected in schools with PBIS, they often disciplined and assigned consequences when students did not follow through on the standards. Most of the time, teachers (13) included foster parents in these decisions. Teachers said they often wanted the same expectations for foster children as other students: “[Foster students] have to have the same expectations as anyone in your class.” Yet this played out with many exceptions including increased numbers of warnings, more second tries and opportunities to redo the situation, all with the purpose of learning the correct behaviors in teachable moments. Teachers balanced the extremes of foster students who “simply didn’t know better” with those who pushed the boundaries with negative attention-getting ploys or bending the rules to their advantages. Consequences also followed a natural path, and this led to some interesting cases, as one

teacher shared:

In a perfect world, you'd hold the expectation the same. But at least for me, in the beginning especially, I think you tend to give the [foster student] a little more leeway. That was part of my problem with [one foster student], who was a behavior problem. He was that type of kid that the more rope you gave him, the worse it became. He needed that firm standard. You probably should give them a little less leeway, but human nature is to give them more. You're probably being counterproductive. I learned quickly not to give him too much of a leash.

Another teacher shared an example of how to work on discipline with verbal conversations:

Lying is a big problem we worked on. Her [foster] parents are dealing with the same issues at home, and they say it comes from her abandonment issues. I tell the mother what I've been doing with addressing it directly and calling her on lies. I ask if it fits with what the counselor would want. She said what I was doing was very good and to keep at it.

With consequences, teachers of all levels said the child's gender mattered: "Little boys handle [discipline] different than little girls. Girl actions weren't as overt as little boys." Another teacher said students as early as primary grades needed to be directly confronted about the effects of their actions and involved in the problem solving discussions. Teachers also consistently insisted that to be successful, behavior scaffolds and interventions had to include foster family input and support. One teacher said:

When you do A, this is why B happens. We want to get [foster students] to see that their behaviors not only affect them, but others as well. The [foster] parents were able to do that and explain it to them. The [foster] parents modeled it to them on what you wanted to see. They showed them and talked about it. No matter what, the kids were going to be loved. Here's why you need to play this way. School was the same way. Put it in their ball game. The kid was an active part in the decision making to own their behaviors and choices.

Providing Privacy for Students and Accountability with Families - Nearly all the teachers (13) discussed behavior plans with students and families collaborating privately in special meetings. Teachers used these times to build common understanding and consensus. Allowing the student and family to process, contribute and reflect, teachers listened and gained insight while also taking the opportunity to clearly repeat expectations and outline

consequences, with details and severity. Rather than making public spectacles, one teacher summarized: “You have to give [foster students] privacy. I respond, ‘Meet me in the hallway for a minute.’ If you embarrass them once in front of others, you’re done. They think, ‘My opinions don’t matter.’ So, we talk. I give them space and respect them, because they haven’t had adults respect them.” Another teacher reflected the balance to adjust plans yet remain consistent:

If you’re not flexible with [foster students,] they’ll have your number. They’ll try to run the classroom, not you. Last year a foster child would just challenge me to everything. She didn’t trust women, because her mom just left them all the time. So, I had to give her space. [Discipline] had to be just one-on-one, or she’d turn it into confrontation in just seconds.

A few teachers (4) said they were met with resistance from the families to help change student’s behaviors. These families did not have a positive relationship with the teacher prior to challenging classroom behavior issues. Teachers said the apparent lack of trust or prior connection made sensitive conversations volatile. In other situations, behavior challenges were beyond the capacity of teachers and families to cope with or improve consistently. Students could not learn to make appropriate choices to succeed in school and at home, and as a result, they sometimes faced other placement alternatives: “I’ve had families give up kids for a transfer because they couldn’t stay up with the behaviors for the long haul. I’ve seen kids leave foster homes and go into level-six psych hospitals.” However, most teachers said families cooperated to find discipline and behavior plans to accommodate individual students. One teacher worked with a foster family who took diligent action:

That foster family wanted to know everything she did. [The foster student] was a biter and scratcher. If she was naughty, her foster family would come up [to the school] and get her. She would be disciplined at home right away. They wanted her to know they cared enough about her to take her home and work through it and bring her back. She had to come back with a sincere apology. She made huge gains. It changed her whole year. She never bit anyone again. I think that would only be successful if you were willing to put that time in. The fact that those parents would leave work and enforce what they said. She finally realized there were limits. She had never experienced that before.

The teachers noted the effects of high involvement from families and ways to make the most of partnerships to change behaviors: “I think that love overcomes a lot of things. If a child knows they’re loved, they may flip out, but if someone is truly consistent with them, it will sink in.” This highlights the imperative role of foster families providing accountability with behavior support.

Seeking Outside Expertise from Community Stakeholders - Problem-solving teams and professional learning communities at the school or district were an important resource for teachers to work through behavior issues. Many teachers (9) noted the importance of school-based teams. Colleagues, including behavior specialists and psychologists, often presented solutions within professional learning communication and grade-level meetings. Past teachers, if the student remained in the same school, offered ideas of discipline strategies. Classroom teachers, as well as special education teachers, said the team-based approach adapted resources and helped offer ways to improve behaviors: “Our principal, school nurse, counselor and social worker and a lot of people work together to make these services possible. People truly care about these kids.” Many teachers mentioned the importance of the school nurse to maintain consistent medicines and basic health care, as well as other staff members essential in assisting with behavior-management for foster students. One teacher said:

Social workers will come through and build relationships with the staff and make sure the home environment is where it needs to be. Our counselor came in and brought me a ton of resources and shared a ton of family therapies that were free or wouldn’t charge a lot.

While schools had these sorts of teams available on a daily basis, some families were not always connected to support services. Teachers said they often took responsibility to serve a connection point to find resources for the family. Many teachers (8) noted a strong network of supporters from the community and foster care agencies that worked in cooperation with foster families. One teacher said she felt “jealous” for some of the therapy, medical, donations and

recreation opportunities available for foster children to be able to share with a wider audience of vulnerable children: “Sometimes the foster families are getting more services, and I wish the other [general or special education] families could get some of them too.” Teachers said when foster families were not linked in to support networks, schools helped to connect the families to services. From dental visits to counseling appointments, teachers said families were given opportunities to serve the children.

Thus, the school became a central hub to share various spokes of resources: “Our counselor has a giant list of all these resources. I’ve seen pamphlets cross hands and the stapled stack of resources go back and forth.” Another teacher conveyed the importance of seeking help: “I know that one foster family had a lot of support because they asked for it. They have to be willing to seek it out and follow up on it.” Another said:

The county mental health is one of our facilities. Within it, there is a program for children with behaviors issues. So many of my families – both foster and general – are involved with that.

To summarize dealing with challenging behaviors, teachers took a firm but flexible approach with PBIS or other school-based systems. Foster students came to school with noticeable behavioral deficits, and teachers worked with their foster families to address discipline and improve student actions with behavior plans: “I try to let them know that I love them, but I won’t accept the behavior. You have to show them over and over that you do care about them. The biggest thing is showing that you care.” Overall, behavior management became a vital piece to establishing successful learning environments for foster children.

Teams of Support Services and Special Education

Due to the struggles with learning, emotions and behaviors, a high percentage of both teachers and foster families sought special education services for foster students. In the IEP process, teachers demanded additional supports: “I try to build the best case I can, which is

portraying [the foster student] as a very low student, because I think they'll benefit from the extra services." Teachers sought to help students and serve foster families with a common goal centered on "wanting what's best for that student." Yet, teachers said there were often disagreements and struggles in finding appropriate services. According to one teacher, many foster students receiving IEP services were "very appropriately diagnosed." Other teachers said they felt some foster students were victims of circumstance: "Foster kids are being misdiagnosed with a learning disability because their lives have been so uprooted. They have not had an opportunity to have anything consistent in their lives." Teachers highlighted hurdles in IEP evaluation, negotiating competing agendas, navigating the ambiguous role of the educational advocate, coping with out-of-touch stakeholders and staying current with fluctuating legal rulings.

Hurdles in Diagnosing and Evaluating - Teachers said many foster students moved into the school with an existing IEP from another district: "With the IEP, you're required by federal law to provide [services]. A third grader is right where he needs to be academically, but he needs help in social and emotional areas. We have to be sure to give everything we can [according to the IEP]. You have to make the right decisions." One teacher noted the procedure for transferring foster students with IEPs:

When a student comes in with an active IEP, they are considered a special education student. The process is to sit down and find out what we can do. We can accept IEP as written, or we can make changes right on the spot. It's a valid document, so if someone comes in with an IEP, they have one in our district too.

For students without existing IEPs, the first step in the special education identification process was evaluating foster children. Teachers said school professionals completed most of the evaluation: "I would say [foster] families are less involved in the IEP process from my experiences." Families rarely took part in this phase of the IEP other than to fill out a form or survey to provide information on the child's background. Sometimes, families were also asked

to submit documentation of previous IEP services.

When foster families started with a new diagnosis, teachers said they felt like parents were unclear on the student evaluation process. One teacher, projecting into the role of a foster parent, said: “I find that it’s very hard, as a parent, to understand the idea of an IEP and how the decisions work. I don’t think the parents, foster or birth, always understand the rights they have in being involved in some of the educational processes.” Schools formally outlined the process in education-speak or printouts, but often teachers lacked the time to explain the complex process in ways families could understand. Also, teachers noted the need to test or assess immediately after starting school, often prior to students building relationships with teachers or teachers building a trusting connection with the foster family. Therefore, many students tested when they were at some of their highest levels of anxiety and discomfort.

Negotiating Competing Agendas and Navigating with the Educational Advocate - The teams assembled to make special education decisions tended to include professionals from both the school and social service spectrums: “The teams do sometimes get pretty big.” Most teachers (8) said they appreciated the input of many diverse perspectives: “It actually is very helpful to have different people involved. The families know the kids in a different way than a teacher.” Another said: “You get to meet everyone [face-to-face], and you can see how much love there is for this kiddo. Everyone pulls together, and I’ve seen it work really well.” However, one teacher noted challenges that can exist in negotiating various viewpoints:

Wow, it’s involved. Basically, it’s the same steps [as a standard IEP], but you just have more people around the table when it’s time to start talking about all that. You have the CASA people, advocates, parents – foster or birth – so you just have several more people. Sometimes the additional people can be very frustrating because they have agendas that impede the educational agenda. It’s kind of like they think the school is trying to do something wrong, and they’re being judgmental of the school. It’s a defensive attitude that comes in, and it is not there when you don’t have all those extra people.

While all of these stakeholders shared their ideas, only one person was in the legal

position to consent to the formal IEP services. Often this individual was the educational advocate, who serves as the legal decision maker for the foster child's education. The educational advocate could be a foster parent, social worker or community volunteer trained and assigned to make educational decisions for the foster child. Education advocates provided a structure through which foster students facing educational challenges are identified, their needs determined and appropriate services provided, often through a school-based IEP. While the specifics of each state system differed depending on legal guidelines, advocates shared a common architecture to manage the referrals and entire case for the child. The advocate's ultimate role was to ensure equitable and seamless services for the child from school to school and provide accountability to the teachers, families and other stakeholders.

Teachers said they understood the central ideas behind the advocate's role for foster students, but at times teachers (3) said the educational advocate was not present and required the school to track the individual down to find them for signatures. When the role of an educational advocate was filled, this person often seemed to cause the most concern for teachers. Some teachers (5) said they felt the advocate caused stress and rigidity, putting an edge to IEP meetings. One teacher noted:

When a parent says, 'I'm bringing in the educational advocate,' the message comes through that they don't trust you. It's as if you're not doing the right thing for the kid because you don't have the child's best interest at heart. It's kind of like when someone says, 'I'm bringing my lawyer,' and you're like, 'Oh, really. I wasn't aware that we needed one.' It was their way or the high way. Just because a strategy works in one situation, it may not work in a classroom of 24 kids. They don't think it all through.

Most teachers implied a negative cogitation regarding the advocate from meetings or interactions: "[Advocates] sometimes forget what we do at school. All of our work has to be educationally relevant. We can't do everything. Some things are not in the educational realm of what we provide, like how to behave in public when shopping for example." Teachers also

struggled to keep another stakeholder informed: “I don’t deal with [the advocate] on a daily basis. The foster families are the ones I communicate with on a daily basis about general school stuff.” Teachers emailed, called and met with the advocates to prepare them for IEP reviews, causing even more time and energy to be invested in one of their many students. Teachers often asked foster families to pass along information, empowering the foster parents to relay the updates since they didn’t have time to track down another stakeholder.

Coping with Out-of-Touch Birth Parents and Other Stakeholders - Educational

advocates were not the only stakeholders often removed from direct contact with students and teachers. When birth parents still had rights intact, teachers said there were many communication difficulties and areas for misunderstanding to occur:

Something that makes it very difficult is that [a foster student’s] legal mother still has rights, so the IEP and educational decisions have to be cleared by her, but the foster parent has the day to day responsibility. Yet, the [foster parents and birth mother] do not communicate. It’s a difficult situation. The person responsible for making the educational decisions is not the person who has the day-to-day contact with the child.

Many birth parents struggled to fulfill their role as the education decision maker because they were behind in understanding the student’s current issues. For example, one birth mother argued about a student’s medical diagnosis, but she couldn’t back up her claim: “Her [the birth mom’s] understanding of his [the foster child’s] diagnosis was off. She was insistent that he had a disability, but we didn’t have any record of him having anything like it.” Without being equipped with current information from either the school or foster care agency, this strain and lack of communication presented multiple challenges since the birth parent was the legal decision maker for the case:

When we had the IEP meeting, the legal mother ended up not being able to make it, so we had to do it over the phone. That was one more obstacle. She was going off of old information. Everything she was telling us was information that was not current. She hadn’t had the day-to-day contact with the child for a while so she didn’t have an updated list of concerns. She was very concerned

that he was walking to school, but he wasn't walking at all, he was riding the bus. That was a big point, but it shouldn't have been an issue at all.

Schools adapted and built working relationships with educational advocates and birth parents since they are legally responsible for the student's education. Teachers attempted to succeed in these relationships by sending double reports home with the child or replying to emails or phone calls from these stakeholders. However, teachers said the requirement to work with other who lacked daily involvement with the students was severely limiting in some cases:

With one foster student, the signatures had to come from the birth mother. I thought it was the worst thing in the whole wide world. We struggled for months to get this child into speech [IEP services] and it was one of the worst cases [of speech problems] I've seen. Finally, we used trial therapy to see if it would work temporarily. On the verbal permission of a social worker, we put the child in the trials, but we had to get the signature for any formal testing. After we finally got the signature, they pulled the child [from the foster home] within three weeks.

Fluctuating Legal Rulings and Case Plan Changes - Teachers said one of the tough factors in educational decision making was the frequent changes in legal rulings and case plans. Teachers often requested information from the courts and foster families on the status of the case plan. Court reports, often released quarterly, offered changes and revisions to the foster children's life circumstances. Foster families often acted as liaisons to get information to school. When possible, teachers shared information to the courts through CASA workers, who also expected teachers to make time to meet, email or call them for formal court reports.

Teachers often did everything they could to delay court decisions if they felt the rulings could jeopardize progress being made in school because of timing with moves: "I beg them to leave this kid with me until the end of the semester or school year. The courts don't take this to mind. It seems to not matter. I know I have you for only so long, so I'm going to pour into you as much as I can." Another said:

If reintegration is the goal and the parents' rights have not been severed, it makes it very difficult to know how much information to give to one side or the

other. We're always asking for court papers and updates to the court documents to know what's been decided so we can be apprised to what is happening. It gets to be a little sticky.

According to teachers, moving from one placement to the next only sets the foster child further back, especially in school. The teachers also conveyed the challenges of educators and foster families working together as a courtesy to each other on behalf of the child, since foster parents are not legally required to be involved in educational decision making unless they are officially designated the educational advocate. Foster families were needed to add an essential element in meetings because they could provide direct information on the child in a home setting. Teachers relied on communication from the foster home for IEP meetings to get a holistic perspective from life outside of school.

For the most part, teachers stepped up their contact and interaction with foster families and other stakeholders due to the need to stay updated on the frequent life changes and challenges seen at school. Most teachers said they were willing to rise to the need for higher levels of communication: "I don't every feel like it's too much to be able to handle. I see us as a team. I'll do what I can on my end since I'm with the child all day long." In the context of IEPs, a teacher reemphasized the importance of collaboration with foster families and gaining their support to ensure progress at school. One teacher said:

The [foster family] is the extension at home. I can only do what I can do for seven hours at school, and if they don't back me up at home, I'm just spinning my wheels in the daytime.

Teachers highlighted hurdles in IEP evaluation, negotiating competing agendas of stakeholders on the team, navigating the ambiguous role of the educational advocate, coping with out-of-touch stakeholders, staying current with fluctuating legal rulings and working with foster families to create successful learning plans for foster children.

In conclusion, teachers shared about their perspectives and experiences as they

interacted with foster parents. This section examined how teachers described their connections and partnerships with parents. Teachers approached foster families in many similar and different ways to birth families. Teachers established immediate partnerships with stakeholders; set up learning structures for student achievement; applied emotional supports and behavior intervention strategies; as well as teams of support services.

Chapter Six - Implications

Overview

Foster parents, teachers and school leaders faced many opportunities and obstacles in educating foster placements. Caring for the exposed population of foster care students takes a network of support, and strong school-to-home connections forged between teachers and foster families can improve educational outcomes for these students. Families, as well as schools, must also be ready to give intensive support so foster students can develop holistic success including both learning and behavior. All parties needed to quickly learn procedures, practices and expectations by gaining straightforward access and information from both the home and school. New associations or prior relationships helped to ensure all stakeholders overcame prejudice towards foster students by remaining optimistic, trusting and transparent. After initiating contact with the schools and home, stakeholders participated in two-way communication to respond to student needs in academic, behavioral, emotional and social areas. Showcasing varied levels of school involvement, some families wanted teachers and school leaders to handle most issues, while other families brought their own research and strategies to the team.

Overall, there was a high threshold of communication with mostly email contact to document interactions. All parties expressed the need for flexibility at times to separate academic and learning goals from the more fundamental home-based focus on building relationships and stability. Parents, teachers and leaders each exerted an influence on the child and needed to balance empathic compassion with flexible accountability to gain connections to foster student. Within the immediate partnerships of foster stakeholders, all parties needed consistent reciprocation and appropriate boundaries to support family leadership at home and teacher authority in schools. Supporting two-way communication, both homes and schools must give frequent, encouraging interactions to maintain trust. These patterns of communications

often carry more objectivity and bluntness than most birth families. At times, families, teachers and school leaders faced indifference, bias, overload, burnout and stress. These common cycles denoted a need for increased professional development opportunities.

Stakeholders worked together to generate academic growth for the foster student by adjusting learning environments. All parties collaborated to create academic modifications, accommodations and extensions on everything from daily assignments and summative performance assessments. Foster parents, teachers and leaders noted the exorbitant needs and increased workloads of educating foster students. Everyone worked together to engage and motivate foster students. Teams used student data for instructional decisions and sought support for learning, even with the potential consequences of transitions and disruptions.

To aid academic performance, stakeholders worked together to address emotional and behavioral deficits with management skills and consistent discipline. All adults modeled and established proper social interactions. Stakeholders attempted to provide emotional and behavioral supports for foster students. Teams established authentic connections and stable environments for the foster student. For behavior intervention strategies, schools employed PBIS models and found appropriate consequences to scaffold improvement of student accountability with family support. Within special education teaming, especially in the process of educational decision-making, families and schools collaborated among many parties to find consensus in IEP discussions. Stakeholders overcame confusion and misunderstandings in the process and advocated for the student. They noted multiple hurdles in the diagnosing and evaluating process due to the short-term, highly volatile status of foster students. Overall, teams sought to find the most appropriate services for foster students. As a result of this dissertation, I discuss many implications for foster parents, educators and school leaders.

Implications for Foster Families

As the responsible party assigned by the state welfare system, foster parents hold the

liability for interacting with schools to prevent educational neglect for foster children. Foster parents must value education, support teachers and establish routines for student learning with provisions of clothing, food and shelter. Families must advocate and transparently share information with teachers. The parents must also persist to meet foster students' exceptional needs of negative behaviors, unstable emotions and learning difficulties.

Advocacy and Information Sharing - As one of the first steps when receiving a new placement, foster parents must enroll students in school and complete the steps necessary to ensure assimilation into the school culture by discussing the expectations and routines with the student. Families must give notice to the schools to ensure adequate preparation time of materials for a new student. Parents can assist in the transfer of past records, if they can be tracked down, by sharing information they obtain from the social workers with the school.

Families should renew existing connections with teachers or build new relationships to the school in order to access information, advocate for their child and inquire about the educational process. Often, parents relied on their personal history with the school from their birth or previous foster children. Some parents found access teachers or school leaders outside of the professional channels through neighborhoods, community organizations or other groups, and the families used these opportunities to promote the cause of educating their foster children. If necessary, families scheduled appointments to form new associations with teachers or principals.

Opening the door for a two-way conversation, parents can share available information with the school on the nature of the foster child's case to help fill in facts to provide background and context to the placement. Although sometimes uncomfortable and stressful, families must advocate for foster children when facing apathetic, indifferent or biased teachers and school leaders. Often, foster parents depended on teachers and school staff members for adjustments

to policies, extensions of deadlines and general help more than the tendencies of general education families. They expected teachers to respect their varied participation and reciprocate the level of contact. Families wanted teachers to learn their preferred style of communication ranging from emails, phone calls, notes or text messages. Families presumed that teachers would use the preferred method out of convenience and routine, but they also understood if the conditions called for a more demanding or immediate level of communication.

Families also must be ready to establish a line of demarcation to separate school from home if foster students need to refocus on more basic concerns like safety, relationship building or recuperate from serious trauma, especially at the beginning of the placement. Families need to be trusted to oversee the short-term partition and maintain appropriate levels of communication with the teacher. They also must update the larger team of teachers and school staff on progress to eventually integrate the student back up to the full pace of the classroom. By starting strong and keeping the focus on the foster student, families can reach sustainable levels of involvement in schools.

Expectations of Teacher Commitment and Persistence - Families should plan to model the level of desired attention, care and oversight they want from teachers to showcase the vital influence of key adults upon foster children. After the foster parents, teachers hold a powerful opportunity to influence the child and cast a vision for their future. Like the family, teachers can make learning, classroom routines and school either favorable or dull, and parents expected teachers to rise to an elevated level of involvement based on their crucial role in the child's life. Families appreciated teachers who became champions for their placements, and families had to empower teachers to take on this role by explaining the importance of their influence upon the child. Parents must be ready to address, respectfully confront and problem solve with teachers who do not hold their students accountable to the level of their potential. Rather than email or

call on matters of great importance, parents often scheduled times to communicate or hold face-to-face meetings on these sensitive topics and keep multiple parties on the same page. Foster families annually obtained continuing education credits with trainings and workshops, and this life-long learning mindset continued into their relationship with teachers. Parents expected teachers to find strategies to investigate and execute in the classroom, as well as fulfill their role as a positive adult in a foster child's life.

Within IEP decisions, foster parents collaborated with classroom teachers, special education teachers, who were often the team leaders, and many other stakeholders to find appropriate placement for their students. Often, they had to work without the formal rights of power to make final decisions for the child because the state appointed an educational advocate or birth parents to officially give consent for IEP services. Yet even without the ability to sign off, foster parents must play a vital role in sharing their observations of home life and interactions outside of school for a holistic perspective.

Parents said their voices were sometimes drowned out amidst all of the professionals from the school and social services, but most found ways to maintain a seat of influence at the table by transparently giving their perspectives on the daily affairs of the child placed full time in their home. Parents often carried the burden of communicating information relating to IEPs to multiple parties including birth families, the court system, social workers and others. Although most learned routines quickly from repeated experience, families must ask questions and clarify each new IEP case to avoid any confusion, prevent mistakes and fully understand the scope of the process. Families also must be ready to help implement plans by following through on responsibilities with support at home.

Addressing Emotions, Behavior and Learning - Within the realm of academics, parents expected teachers to actively attempt to deliver instruction to catch students up to grade level

and fill in gaps of understanding. Classroom routines may need to be altered, and parents must push for teachers to serve foster students with additional prompts, reminders and focus techniques. Foster families elaborated on instructional and academic strategies, such as modifications and accommodations in order to not overwhelm students. Parents wanted teachers to find an appropriate workload and level of assignments, not just hand the whole responsibility to the families.

Families often contacted teachers to account for the unique experiences and needs of foster students by giving alternative projects, authentic assessments on the child's level or grouping to allow students to contribute a smaller piece to the overall project. Often, families and teachers made decisions based on universal screeners or preliminary assessments to place students in the highest level of MTSS or flexible groupings. Families need to monitor teachers to ensure students were on track and making progress. Families must be ready for low scores on assessments and grades, knowing their students struggle. Parents, teachers and even students can set realistic scholastic goals and steps for academic improvement.

Furthermore, families should be ready to contribute to plans for interpersonal and behavioral strategies to manage emotions, maintain steady discipline in the face of erratic behaviors and gather firsthand observations of student behaviors in school. Due to the ongoing struggle for foster students to gain control, families had to simultaneously focus on emotions and behaviors to secure a successful school experience. When experiencing high-levels of trauma at early ages, foster youth must learn to practice emotional management skills. Parents had to ensure teachers gave flexibility, forgiveness and freedom to recover and try again, at times avoiding punishment to focus on larger goals of character development and making appropriate decisions. Families must share the larger perspective to the often-irregular behaviors frequently connected to visits with birth families or case plan changes. Parents had to

alert teachers to these trigger points and causes of behaviors to create understanding and an allowance to these behaviors, while both parties maintained coherent discipline and consequences if warranted.

Families had to ensure teachers knew their role to oversee peer interactions to keep all students safe from the sometime destructive explosions and manipulations of foster students who can be both victims and bullies. Families, not present during the school day, often had to contact teachers to research and find out the full story. If they couldn't find the facts, they often scheduled observations to accurately trace patterns of behaviors or address specific concerns. Families, at times, stepped up beyond most general education parents to have no-nonsense, honest conversations about lacking skills, like bathroom procedures, hygiene concerns and social appropriateness as a response to negative behaviors. Parents openly and routinely addressed these concerns with foster children who lacked developmental skills and did not properly adjust to social situations. Yet, most foster families refused to give up on their placements, since they intentionally took on the responsibilities of foster care knowing they would engage troubled youth. They advocated strongly for schools to assist with behavioral, emotional and social progress for their foster children.

Beyond the network of management and bureaucratic issues from the schools, parents detailed many successes, as well as weaknesses, in forming school-to-home connections in educating and parenting their foster care placements. Overall, foster parents matter in making a difference for students and teachers by advocating for their children, approaching teachers who do not meet their expectation and address concerns relating to the entire educational experience. Parents must take leadership to ensure a strong education and long-term benefits of literacy, computation and life skills for their foster placements.

Implications for Educators

Specifically for elementary teachers, many implications exist in working with foster families and their placements. Teachers must professionally approach the foster parents and students with understanding, empathy and compassion balanced with accountability and responsibility. Teachers must be ready to scaffold life lessons into daily routines to allow foster children to become increasingly independent as they slowly gain autonomy and self-reliance. Even when faced with stress and crisis, teachers can follow practical steps to promote strong connections and build relationships with foster parents to support their students.

Professional Preparation and Partnering with Families or Stakeholders - To establish partnership with a sense of purpose and urgency to start strong, teachers must be ready to meet foster student at any point in the school term. They must have predetermined plans to welcome new students and share vital information on routines, expectations and school culture with families in packets or websites. Teachers' proactive planning can prevent situational stress in relationship building as they greet foster students and families often with short notice.

Teachers must be ready for some foster families who avoid school contact and lack follow-through. Educators can involve other stakeholders such as case managers or educational advocates on the foster care team if the parents raise warning flags. Educators may exercise caution in communicating with some foster families who create suspicion based on past actions violating their trust. Regardless, teachers must also find ways to be supportive with frequent, encouraging interactions and a higher volume communication geared for a tendency to be objective and candid.

Teachers must stress the importance of keeping foster children in school to families and social workers who frequently removed students for family visits, court appearances, medical appointments or other meetings. Also, teachers advocated for consistency in trying not to move children from foster homes or change social workers since disruptions often detrimentally

affected foster children.

Instructional Adaptability and Integrated Learning - Academically, teachers need to be prepared for the inflated amount of demands and needs of both foster children and their families, often leading to increased workloads and more communication. Attempting multiple student achievement strategies, teachers must use data to make decisions to find appropriate placement in the array of services available for students with high needs. While teachers ensure the most effective instruction during the school day, they must suggest approaches for creative learning at home activities and homework to help shore up skills and close gaps in learning. Giving real-life skills in a real-world context, teachers must work with families to find practical ways for students to build cultural capital and gain life experiences relating to a positive school career. Thus, teachers encouraged families to take foster children to museums, art exhibits, science fairs, trips and other interest areas.

Within special education services, teachers noticed multiple difficulties in the process of identifying and evaluating students for special education services. Often, children moved in with an existing IEP from a different district, and teachers must mold and adjust these plans into the dynamics of their schools. When formal meetings were called for review, teachers prepared themselves to work with many individuals on the IEP team. Often the final decisions came down to an educational advocate or birth parent. Teachers often had to find ways to involve these out-of-touch stakeholders in the learning patterns of students. Teachers struggled with this role, and they often passed the responsibility off to foster parents since their roles did not allow time to communicate with these distant parties. Also, teachers must remain current on the frequent changes of case plans and court decisions from families and caseworkers. Teachers must remain fluid in their plans for the child, since so many dynamics are out of their control.

Responding to Stress and Crisis - Teachers shared about emotional supports needed for

foster students who needed deeper connections to caring adults to bond appropriately. Through authentic attachments, teachers sought to build stability and encourage positive social connections. Sometimes foster children became so secure they broke off their emotional covers or facades, yet other foster students became more entrenched showing signs of reactive attachment disorder. Teachers must establish predictable, unsurprising and well-planned classroom routines to avoid confusion, randomness and chaos. Teachers noted their role to ensure appropriate peer interactions and responsibility to help encourage other students to set positive examples for foster students who lack many basic social cues. Teachers must recognize burnout and exhaustion frequently occurring within foster placements due to the high demands. Like all humans, teachers faced a limited capacity to invest in a single student since they juggled the demands of the whole class. They also found they kept intentional distance to some foster students and families who did not return authentic relationships. Teachers must be ready for a small group of foster families who lack investment in the children and create emotionless routines reinforced the distance and restraint. Yet, overall teachers must leverage their relationship with the student and parents to create emotional security and pass on skills in coping and adjusting to life.

Relating to behaviors, teachers must apply intervention strategies to foster students with various behavior models and plans. Teachers must be ready for the complicated, extreme and impulsive behaviors of foster students, yet not create self-fulfilling prophecies by treating foster students differently. Teachers must find appropriate consequences and discipline with the support of foster families to address the roller coaster effects of behaviors, often linked to circumstances beyond the child's control. Remaining understanding, calm and professional, teachers must watch to not take out any personal negative behaviors like yelling, sarcasm or verbal aggression out on the foster children. In terms of communicating the volatile behavior

concerns to foster families, teachers need to share situations openly with the parents to find targeted interventions.

Knowing as much of the home life and background as possible helps teachers as they scaffold behavior instruction to fit the individual cases. Due to the behavior challenges, teachers also need foster parents to provide accountability for the student at home and support the conditions put into place in schools. Interlaced with abuse or demanding tremendous attention due to neglect, foster students provoke and aggravate others for negative attention. Teachers must have methods to prevent outbursts and address the student with respect and care. Educators can work with professional learning communities and colleagues to seek expertise and reflect on new methods of handling the cases. Teachers can build teams within the school to support the specific behaviors of foster students in the light cast by recognizing their unique status in life and identifying the causes of the behaviors. Requiring more communication with foster families, teachers must keep a long-term perspective to set realistic goals for behavior plans.

Overall, teachers faced many responsibilities in educating and working with the foster child and their families. They must build partnerships and share information back and forth about learning, behaviors and emotions. Teachers must adapt to the fluctuating changes of foster student's lives. While they exercise as much control as possible, teachers often lacked power to achieve everything they wanted, so they must compromise down to the essentials and find creative ways to handle foster children and families.

Implications for School Leaders

Principals and school leaders face many decisions on planning, discipline, IEP oversight, staffing and resource distribution that deal with foster students and families. Principals often interceded to listen to each side and help facilitate compromise. Yet, at times, district leaders

became involved at the request of both school leaders and families. Several issues commonly presented a struggle, including setting the tone of district culture, human resources, research-based professional development planning, and details of legalities within the judicial system.

Establishing Inclusiveness of All Learners - First, families noted a specific need for district leaders to focus on an inclusive and supportive culture to reach all learners. When district focused on all learners as a core value, both families and teachers can set their sights to deliver strategies to serve the least-of-these students. Rather than just focus on high-achieving students, leaders must be especially in tune to the social justice of ensuring educational equality for everyone. Not only in the spotlight of public events like speeches and press releases, school leaders can deliver the daily inspiration by visiting classrooms with walk-throughs and rounds of encouragement for inclusive instruction.

Leaders must empower their staff to follow these values and make it their mission to highlight low performing students to continually adjust approaches to ensure growth. From the tone of interactions to the agendas of staff meetings, school leaders can push teachers to deliver their best to all students, especially those needing the most assistance from their role as a caring adult. Teachers noted the benefits of principals focusing on all learners, as well as school leaders who schedule specific family-friendly events for their entire school population. Beyond the typical parent and teacher conferences, events like math nights, carnivals, concerts, fitness events and open houses can help promote the family-friendliness of the school.

Families noted the role of district culture in approaching schools from their neighborhoods and community. Schools and districts gain reputations, and leaders must help shape the status of their buildings or organizations to promote growth for every student. Thus, both families and teachers also benefited from the motivation of leaders who cast a strong vision of empowering staff to build relationships and promote connections with struggling

students. Overall, a supportive culture targets vulnerable students, like those in foster care, to receive proactive assistance and improve society.

Strategic Placements and the Importance of School Routines - Leaders played a major role in the placement of foster students in special education settings by overseeing a clear and focused process. First, when a student enrolls in the school, leaders must consider the classroom selection for the student with a few factors including strengths of the teacher to work with high-needs students and openness in communicating with families. Foster parents didn't want their foster students in the classroom with the lowest number of students, but rather with a teacher who could handle working with students' unique needs. Teachers also expected consideration when new foster students arrived at the school to find the most appropriate classroom based on the conditions of their management styles, existing dynamics and classroom numbers. Principals can include teacher teams in the decisions by asking about their perspectives of classroom placement. Yet, finding the appropriate fit for the student and teacher came down to the administration's decision and they must have a systematic procedure for ensuring the placement could start successfully.

Additionally in IEP cases, school leaders took on responsibility to make the final decisions for the school in determining the level of services required for the students' exceptionality. The principle must be prepared to work with many stakeholders and at times navigate through the disagreements of individual's thoughts to arrive at a final decision according to the laws of special education. Principals must be equipped to answer questions and address issues with anyone on the team, so they must be engaged and informed with data to make these decisions for placement.

Foster cases compared to general education students demanded more attention and involvement on the part of school leaders for multiple reasons including discipline, behavior

plans and IEP meetings. Principals often had to exert leadership skills to manage students and to calm both foster families and teachers in times of stress or conflict that often arose around the concerns of foster placements. Principals, and at times district leaders, must exercise their skills to build consensus on teams and reach agreements in the sometimes heated and tense arguments. Breaking the pressure, principals must be ready to diffuse situations with their presence, ability to listen and problem solve. Principals also fielded more questions, emails, meetings and concerns from foster families than other from families. Other foster care stakeholders frequently requested even more meetings, reports and surveys for medical diagnose or court decisions. All of these effects combined to take additional time from the already packed schedule of an administrator.

Support for Professional Development and Understanding the Law - Many staffing and human resources issues arose as an implication for district leaders and principals. As class sizes increase, the effects can be detrimental to low-performing students like those in foster care. Even changes of a few students increased in the teacher-to-pupil ratio equates to lower success for these at-risk populations. In addition, support staff like aides and paraprofessionals must be fully staffed and consistently placed to work with students to build consistently solid routines. Rather than moving and shifting schedules of these individuals, foster placements need the reliability of a regular relationship. Often times linked to budget concerns, staffing must be considered by school leaders to find adequate supervision and support. Also, counselors, nurses and school social workers positions are often cut to protect the classroom, but these key positions have more of an effect on foster students who rely on their services.

Also connected to human resources topics, teachers and staff often sought professional development training to work with foster care students and their families. Teachers wanted opportunities to research the unique learning, behavioral or emotional disabilities and patterns.

They needed time to invest reflecting on their classroom procedures. They also sought additional time to present specific challenges to student improvement teams or professional learning communities to find solutions from colleagues. Interactions with special education teachers or other departments within the district also were needed as teachers crossed over to various areas of speech, occupational therapists, physical therapists, counselors and others with meetings during plan times or around the instructional core. Paraprofessionals and aides may need training on technology tools, like MTSS and PBIS documentation for student progress, to stay organized or keep students engaged and on track to goals based on their individual plans. Overall, teachers and staff looked to principals and district leaders to develop instructional and management skills to serve foster students and their families. School leaders must recognize these demands and find solutions to keep teachers learning about strategies to serve these at-risk populations and ensure student achievement.

Legally, principals and school officials struggled to stay current with the fluctuating judicial rulings and changes in the formal case plans. Often schools worked with insufficient background information. Principals frequently called families, social workers and the court system to find out who received official notice of IEP evaluations or reports from school. Foster care placements came with an air of ambiguity, and principals need to cut through the unknowns to find answers based on the court decisions.

To summarize, school leaders must be inclusive of all learners. Leaders must make strategic placements of the students into the most appropriate learning environment and demonstrate the importance of following routines. Finally, leaders must support professional development and understand the law in foster care settings.

Conclusion and Future Directions

My study found that foster parents, teachers and school leaders can implement attitudes and practices to fulfill their responsibilities towards educating foster youth. Yet, this

study contains limitations regarding common critiques of qualitative research methodology in general and some specifically inherent to this study. As the researcher, I have given careful thought to account for these limitations in order to minimize the potential impacts.

For example, there may be incongruities between the information provided and actual beliefs or practices with self-reported data. Interviews can lead to social desirability bias, where participants “give the ‘right’ answer rather than the real answer” (Sue & Ritter 2007:40). In order to address the issues with participant reactivity, I made an effort to create an environment that was conducive to open and honest dialogue. To encourage participants to be at ease, some interviews were conducted over the phone rather than face-to-face. More than half of the participants chose a phone interview. At the beginning of all interviews, I acknowledged the research agenda and assured participant confidentiality. To reduce the limitation of potential bias during data analysis, I removed all participant names and coded all transcripts blindly so as not to associate any material or data with any particular individual.

In this study, I collected my data solely from in-depth interviews of 31 participants in a suburban area in the Midwest. Future research extending this study might include mixed methods, such as surveys, observations, document analysis and other data collection methods. Surveys may enable an increased sample size, but they lack the detail elicited by interviews. Observations of classrooms and homes in a foster care setting could add helpful context, sharing eyewitness accounts from an outside source. Document analysis of case plans and schoolwork could also be completed to learn more of the characteristics of individual foster youth. However, confidentiality and privacy restrictions regarding children in state custody would make this procedure extremely difficult.

Future work relating to the topic could narrow the purposeful sample of foster families working with specific types of concerns like physical difficulties or emotional disorders. Many

related and worthwhile questions could also extend this study. For example, how do foster families or teachers describe school interactions with foster students who have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder or specifically found to have experienced sexual abuse? How do school-to-home connections vary for shorter or longer than average lengths of placements? Specific studies such as these may provide additional understanding and insight for teachers and families working with narrower populations within foster care.

Interviewing other populations in additional geographic locations may provide interesting comparisons or contrasts to my study within a suburban Midwestern area. For example, schools in rural areas may face a lack of resources to adequately approach vulnerable students, which could impact foster family experiences. Conversely, the strain experienced by many urban schools may also present unique case scenarios for foster families.

Continued exploration in the study of school-to-home connections in foster settings is recommended to provide additional processes to guide education policy. As this current study is representative of foster families and elementary teachers, future investigations suggest a study of middle or high school populations or a longitudinal study over multiple years. Foster student and family dynamics change as students grow older in upper grades, thus relationships and interactions may be different. Following the progress of foster students over many years as they navigate through higher levels of school and interact with a variety of teachers would provide for a more comprehensive study. School principals, special education directors or other district officials could also be interviewed for their insight. The quest to determine school-to-home factors and improve foster student success leads to other critical questions for researchers to understand ways teachers and families contribute to meaningful connections in foster care settings.

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Appendix

Teacher Interview Tool

1. Please share about your background and experience in the elementary classroom.

Can you tell me about some of your both overarching philosophies and specifics practices for involving families?

2. I understand you've worked with foster families and students in foster care. How many foster students have you interacted with in the past three years? What can you remember about them? Can you describe a specific experience interacting with foster families? How have you built relationships with foster families? Explain how your practices are different or similar compared to birth families?

3. How do you find out that a family you work with is a foster family? How do you describe your relationship with these families?

4. Often, foster families work with many other professionals like social workers and legal representatives. How aware are you of the process for making educational decisions for the student in foster care? How often are you involved as a part of the larger 'team'?

5. Can you describe your communication with foster families? Would you consider it 'two-way'? How does it compare or contrast to birth families?

6. How have you witnessed other families come 'along side' foster care families to support them? Do you see other families in the school take foster families 'under their wing'?

7. Are foster families more or less likely to volunteer in your classroom or school? What effect does that have on your interactions?

8. How do foster families help to communicate acceptable and unacceptable behavior at school? How do you think the foster child picks up such messages at home or school? Can you

recall any experiences in this regard?

9. What are the pros and cons in interacting with foster families? How do you attempt to address the challenges? What are the hardest parts? Do you have ideas to solve some of these challenges?

10. Imagine an ideal setting for establishing a relationship with foster families. What are the ideals in creating this scenario? Can you describe it?

11. Final Thoughts

Family Interview Tool

1. Can you share about your background and experience as a foster family? What were your motivations and reasons for getting started as a foster family? How many foster kids have you had in your home? Tell me about some of your elementary school-aged foster kids.
2. Can you tell me about some of the ways you are involved with your child's teacher and school? What is a specific time when you've initiated interactions with the teacher? What was the first contact with the teacher? How did you start these interactions?
3. How do you describe your interactions with the teachers of your students in foster care? What are ways you maintain and sustain that relationship? Can you tell me about times when you've interacted?
4. Are teachers as 'tuned-in' to the needs of foster children? From your perspective, how do teachers help to support the unique needs of foster children in the classroom? What are some of the specific things they do to help?
5. I'd like to talk to you a little bit about how you interact with your foster child at home. Do you mind telling me what you do or say in order to communicate acceptable and unacceptable behavior both at home and at school? How do you think the foster child picks up such messages at home or school? Can you recall any experiences in this regard?
6. What are the specific practices you use to keep teachers up-to-date with the frequent changes and transitions? What are some of the ways you communicate with teachers to maintain the relationship you've established?
7. What are your practices, routines and strategies to help support learning at home with learning activities or homework? Can you describe a specific experience in helping students at home academically?
8. Often, foster families work with many other professionals like social workers and legal

representatives. How do you see your role as a foster parent in decision-making within the larger team? Can you describe a specific experience that you can remember where you helped in the decision making process regarding the education of your foster child?

9. Can you describe a specific experience when you volunteered or were in the classroom or school for a meeting or conference? What effect does time at school have on your relationship with the teacher?

10. How have other families come along side your family to offer support? How has it made a difference for your family?

11. Final reflections

Participant Consent Form

HSCL #19784

INTRODUCTION - The Department of Educational Leadership and Policy at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this unit, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY - The purpose of this study is to understand how elementary teachers and foster parents describe the nature of school-to-home connections.

PROCEDURES - You will be asked to reflect on your experiences and answer questions in a 60-minute interview that will be audio and/or video recorded. You have the option of not being taped or having taping stopped at any time. These recordings are not required to participate in the study. The researcher will be transcribing the recordings. Only the researcher and study advisory committee will have access to the recordings and notes, which will be stored in a locked cabinet. The recordings will be erased following publication planned for April 2012.

RISKS - There are no anticipated risks.

BENEFITS - This study will discover knowledge that will help school districts and foster families maximize schooling for youth in the public education system.

PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS - Participants will not be paid.

PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY - Your name will not be associated in any publication or presentation with the information collected about you or with the research findings from this

study. Instead, the researcher will use a study number or a pseudonym rather than your name. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless required by law or you give written permission. Permission granted on this date to use and disclose your information remains in effect indefinitely. By signing this form you give permission for the use and disclosure of your information for purposes of this study at any time in the future.

REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION - You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, you cannot participate in this study.

CANCELLING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION - You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose further information collected about you, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to: Lucas Shivers, 21632 W. 61st St. Shawnee, KS 66218. If you cancel permission to use your information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information about you. However, the research team may use and disclose information that was gathered before they received your cancellation, as described above.

**Approved by the Human Subjects Committee University of Kansas,
Lawrence Campus (HSCL). Approval expires one year from 12/20/2011.
HSCL #19784**

QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION should be directed to:

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785.532.8628

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If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL) office at (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385, write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7568, or email irb@ku.edu.

KEEP THIS SECTION FOR YOUR RECORDS. IF YOU WISH TO PARTICIPATE TEAR OFF THE FOLLOWING SECTION AND RETURN IT TO THE RESEARCHER.

PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION: If you agree to participate in this study please sign where indicated, then tear off this section and return it to the investigator(s). Keep the consent information for your records. I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study and the use and disclosure of information about me for the study. I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

Type/Print Participant's Name

Date

Participant's Signature